

Engaging the Muslim World

Context

Hady Amr, director of the Brookings Doha Center, Qatar, has long argued that the deepening divide between the United States and Muslim nations and communities poses a huge barrier to our success on a breadth of vital issues, from running down terrorist groups to expanding economic development and political freedom. In July 2007, he joined Michael O'Hanlon in a "listening session" with prominent Muslims with a variety of perspectives.

Contributors

Waleed Al Banawi is the Vice Chairman of the Jeddah, Saudi Arabia-based Banawi Industrial Group, one of the leading manufacturing groups in the Gulf region with core businesses in Packaging and Specialty Chemicals. Waleed also holds the position of Vice Chairman of the Board for many of the Group's (subsidiary) JV companies spread around the Middle East region. Waleed attended schools in Beirut, Switzerland, France and Heidelberg – Germany, and the U.S. He obtained is undergraduate studies at Rice University (Texas) in Managerial Studies & Political Science with a minor in Anthropology. He is currently pursuing a Global Master of Arts at Fletcher School (Tufts University).

Akram Baker is an organizational development expert who has led restructuring processes of central banks and key governmental institutions in the Middle East. Additionally, he is co-President of the Arab Western Summit of Skills, a global platform for professionals dedicated to development in the Arab world. Currently, he commutes between Ramallah and Berlin. In his spare time, Akram is a political analyst for the



BBC and a writer on U.S.-Middle East issues, being published in the International Herald Tribune, The Daily Star (Beirut), UPI, Bitter lemons, Die Zeit (Germany).

Dr. Karim Makdisi is an Assistant Professor of International Relations and International Environmental Policy in the Political Studies and Public Administration Department at the American University of Beirut (AUB). He received both his Masters of Arts in Law and Diplomacy and his Ph.D. in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Boston). He is also the coordinator of the Environmental Policy Planning component of AUB's Interfaculty Graduate Environmental Science Program. Previously, Dr. Makdisi worked as an Economic Affairs Officer in UN-ESCWA's Economic Development Issues and Policies Division (2001-2002) and in the Environment Team of the Sustainable Development and Productivity Division (2002-2004) where he worked on projects (such as governance for sustainable development and regional trade and environment capacity building in the Arab region) related to the Arab region's follow-up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD).

Elina Noor is an analyst at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. Previously, she worked at the Brookings Institution's Project on US Relations with the Islamic World, and the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies. Her most recent publication is a chapter on 'Al-Ma'unah and the Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia' in Andrew T H Tan (ed.) *A Handbook on Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), 2007. Elina holds degrees in law from Oxford University and London School of Economics, and in security studies from Georgetown University.

Saif Shahin is an assistant editor with the Doha-based Qatar Tribune newspaper, which he helped launch in September 2006. Over the past 10 years, he has worked with various print, broadcast and online news organizations in the Middle East, the UK and India. He mostly writes on international affairs, arts and culture and media issues. He holds a Masters degree in online journalism from the University of Central Lancashire, UK.

Michael O'Hanlon is a senior fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, where he specializes in U.S. defense strategy, the use of military force, homeland security and American foreign policy. He is a visiting lecturer at Princeton University, and a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the Council on Foreign Relations. His latest publication is the book entitled *A War like No Other: the Truth about China's Challenge to America* (Wiley & Sons, 2007), co-authored with Richard C. Bush. O'Hanlon was an analyst at the Congressional Budget Office from 1989-1994. He also worked previously at the Institute for Defense Analyses. His Ph.D. from Princeton is in public and international affairs; his bachelor's and master's degrees, also from Princeton, are in the physical sciences.

Jeremy Shapiro is the Director of Research of the Center on the U.S. and Europe (CUSE) at the Brookings Institution and a fellow in foreign policy studies. He is the co-author, with Philip Gordon, of *Allies at War: America, Europe, and the Crisis over Iraq* (McGraw-Hill, 2004), an analysis of the transatlantic diplomacy over Iraq. He also edits CUSE's U.S.-Europe Analysis Series and serves as a resource for the Washington community and the media on issues related to Europe and U.S.-European relations. Mr. Shapiro has held positions at the National Defense University, at SAIC, and at the Oracle Corporation. He has B.A. in Computer Science from Harvard University, an M.A. in International Relations and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at MIT.

Correspondence

From: Michael O'Hanlon

Sent: Tuesday, July 10, 2007 5:59 PM

Subject: First questions for Brookings OPP08 dialogue

Question: How bad are U.S. relations with the Islamic world, and how much (if at all) will they improve almost automatically once George Bush is no longer the American president?

From: Akram A. Baker

Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 1:09 AM

US relations with the entire world are at an all-time low. They will improve automatically in so far as they can't get worse (unless Cheney takes over) and most

people would still rather like the US than hate it. However, it is not simply an image problem. The Bush Administration has set the cause of reform and democracy in the Islamic world back at least 15-20 years through its actions in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Iran because the lofty and often repeated rhetoric went 180 degrees against the reality of its actions. There need to be major policy shifts if any US administration wants to fundamentally change its relationship with a broad spectrum of the Islamic world.

I think Barack Obama would initially have the advantage if he were to become President because of his anti-Iraq War stance, ethnicity, and demeanor, and most Muslims would actually WANT him to succeed and foster better relations.

From: Waleed Al Banawi

Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 2:41 AM

Let me put it this way - I've lived and studied in the U.S during the early 80's and since that period I have been engaging with leading thought leaders in business, academia, and policy experts.

Every one (including I) admits U.S relations with the Muslim world are at the 'worst' ever. Not even during Reagan era - where the *Neoccons* were in infiltrating the key positions in the U.S Administration-) did we see the sort of animosity, hostility and equally distrust that exists today between U.S & Muslim World, and its People (especially the average man on the street).

It's my view that U.S relations with the Muslim world won't get better (as quickly as one would want) with change of a U.S President, but rather through a paradigm shift in Policy direction towards our Middle East region, including the Muslim world!!

U.S policy makers need a 'sober' assessment of their policy towards the Muslim world - one that can only emerge through a careful prognosis of deep root-causes of what led us here in the first place! (and not mere superficial analysis of symptoms of *Political*

Islamists movements or actions of *Sacred Rage* going on in the streets of Islamabad, Cairo!!)

The so-called Islamic Fundamentalists (or as western media describes as forces of Militant Islam) are not representative of majority Muslims. In Truth their emergence, (actually their whole "Raison d'être" - and reasons they've congregated) are only proof of major *faux pas* on part of U.S Policy towards the region!! I will dwell later on where and how American policy failed by dismissing early warning signs - primarily thru blind support of 'Failed states' in the region, despite quest of many people across the Middle East, yearning for the expression of people's will as "the proper origin" of political power!

From: Elina Noor

Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 11:12 AM

Some points to address the first part of Michael's question, "How bad are U.S. relations with the Islamic World?"

- As far as Muslim Southeast Asia (SEA) is concerned, G2G cooperation remains strong especially in the areas of security, i.e. intel exchange, CT training, and law enforcement. There are also solid economic ties that prevail. The US is, for example, Malaysia's largest trading partner and Malaysia is the US' tenth.
- Major irritant in relations between the two has been and continues to be US foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East.
- While there is respect for/admiration of certain values in the US, there is also great distrust of US motives in its involvement in the Muslim world. Iraq has only aggravated this.

Second part: How much (if at all) will U.S.-Islamic world relations improve almost automatically once George Bush is no longer the American president?

There will be some relief at a change of administration but relations will not significantly improve unless the US rethinks its policies in an honest fashion. This has to start with it taking a more neutral position vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue to restore

trust and credibility in the Muslim world. Changes in its policies towards Iraq and elsewhere will have to follow suit quickly. Without a paradigmatic change in foreign policy, it doesn't really matter who the American President is.

From: Karim Makdisi

Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2007 11:19 AM

US relations with the Arab-Islamic world are extremely poor.

Three points that need to be made at the outset are:

1. This is not a "clash of civilizations" issue that the neocons and al-Qaeda would like their supporters to believe. Rather it is a matter begun by years of reckless and ignorant US policy-making that has totally lost touch with the realities on the ground in the Arab world; and which has engendered a violent reaction. Arabs (and Muslims) do not hate America; they resent US policies in the region.
2. While this Bush administration has been particularly disastrous in its dealings with the Arab-Islamic world, the policy rot goes beyond it towards the wider policy community in the US. The notion that the Arab-Islamic world can be divided into neat "us" versus "them" (or "moderates" versus "radicals"; or "terrorists" versus "democrats", etc.) categories that can be easily sold to the public via media and PR campaigns distorts the realities on the ground, and prevents a coherent policy from emerging. Moreover, US policy makers should distinguish between genuine movements of resistance that have deep public support (e.g. Hizbullah in Lebanon) and those terrorist movements (mostly unpopular) seeking to gain legitimacy because of US blunders and corrupt Arab regimes (e.g. Al-Qaeda and their spin-offs such as Fath al-Islam in Lebanon).
3. To improve relations, this or any other US administration, should accept (a) that a just settlement to the question of Palestine is, and always has been, paramount to stability and conflict resolution in the region; and (b) that advocating genuine democracy means accepting the choices people in the Arab world make (this means accepting, for instance, that Hizbullah and Hamas have core constituencies in Lebanon

and Palestine respectively, and thus allowing them to share power in their respective countries).

In short, the situation is bleak, and it does not seem likely to get better because while the Bush administration has taken belligerence towards the Arab world to a new high (and thus sparked a violent reaction), the core US policy-making institutions (supported by a battery of popular cultural outlets that demonize Arabs and Muslims) have not seemed to grasp the importance of justice, resistance (to Israel), and social equality/development (not provided by US-backed Arab regimes) to the Arab public.

From: Saif Shahin

Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2007 9:57 AM

I would tend to agree with those of you who are saying that US relations with the Islamic world are at an all-time low, for it is difficult to imagine relations to be worse than they are today. There is what I might call a 'suspension of belief' among Muslims vis-à-vis the U.S. Everything that the US does is viewed with suspicion; even supposedly bridge-building efforts of Washington don't cut much ice with the community.

I would also say that this sentiment itself does not divide 'extremist' and 'moderate' Muslims. While the moderates do not go on and blow up Americans or their allies, they too view the US with as much distrust and disdain as the extremists. Which means that the basic difference between moderates and extremists is not over their assessment of or feelings towards the US, it is simply a difference in self-control.

But as a Muslim who has grown up and lived with other Muslims in India, the UK and the Middle East, I must add that US-Islamic world relations have ALWAYS been bad. Their current status does not just derive from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and other actions of President Bush, but is informed by US policies towards the Muslim world in general over decades. Therefore, just a change of guard in Washington will not help matters much, if at all. If a Democrat replaces Bush, sections of the

community will keep an open mind and give him a chance to show himself/herself to be different, but that will be all.

That is not to say the relations just cannot be mended. If a new president shows himself/herself to be vastly different, not just from Bush but from several of his predecessors, too in policies towards the Islamic world, it will surely improve matters. This will include pulling out of Iraq and Afghanistan, resolving or at least trying to resolve the Palestinian crisis in a way that does justice to the Palestinians, easing tensions with Iran and generally reducing the US military presence worldwide.

From: Akram A. Baker

Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2007 10:45 AM

I just wanted to add my voice in agreement regarding Saif's comments about how the vast majority of Muslims have more or less the same, negative view of the US; the difference is in the methods of voicing this discontent. If a new President is curious to know why the Islamic world thinks like that, and is genuinely willing to listen to the answers with an open mind, I am 100% sure he/she would find a very broad cross section of Muslims willing to speak in an open, constructive, and non accusatory manner. In the end, it would be a win-win situation.

From: Elina Noor

Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2007 12:02 PM

While I agree, fundamentally, with all that's been said about the debacle that's been US foreign policy (particularly in the ME), and that there is great distrust of the US across the general Muslim world, I also want to underline that it's equally important to take an objective view of US-Muslim world relations, and to take into account whatever strengths prevail in the relationship so that we can further build on them.

SEA, and specifically Muslim SEA, bristles at the ad hoc manner in which the US has paid attention to it. There is the perception here that the US only focuses on SEA when a security crisis arises e.g. during the Vietnam War and post-9/11 when Muslim SEA was labeled 'the second front' in GWOT. When Washington's radar was tuned back to SEA after 9/11, it was primarily for CT purposes and every area of cooperation discussed had to have some security element tied to it.

However, SEA's resentment and other minor relationship blips notwithstanding, the US' ties with the region have never reached a boiling point. As I mentioned earlier, trade ties have remained strong and security cooperation has increased. The US' diplomatic relationship with Indonesia has improved since 9/11 even though a small percentage of the country's population may be prepared to carry out terror attacks against US interests in protest against US policies.

My point here is that we shouldn't neglect the positives of our relationship with the US even though the picture right now may be very bleak. Of course, I may be in the minority here on this since the Southeast Asian situation is slightly different from the Middle East's.

From: Saif Shahin

Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2007 4:23 PM

As Elina writes, America's economic and defense ties with South East Asia are good, and SEA governments want them to improve further. But so it is with many governments in the Middle East. And so it is with India and Pakistan. That does not mean the Muslim populaces of these countries, or even individual politicians, hold the US in high regard.

In my interactions with SEA ministers, diplomats and common people, I see the same antipathy towards the US as I do among Muslims elsewhere.

But Elina makes an interesting point that the "Muslim SEA bristles at the ad hoc manner in which the US has paid attention to it". It's the same in countries like Pakistan, where even 'pragmatic' Muslim leaders and army generals, who in principle want close ties with Washington, deplore the way in which US governments have treated their country after it has served its purpose.

"Pakistan was the condom the Americans needed to enter Afghanistan. We've served our purpose and they think we can be just flushed down the toilet," one army general told writer Tariq Ali about the Afghanistan war of the 1980s. It did little good when the US went back to them for help after 9/11.

The 'distrust' for the US, therefore, shrouds the vision of even those Muslims who don't want to be swayed by US policies in the Middle East but want to assess it in purely bilateral terms.

From: Jeremy Shapiro

Sent: Friday, July 13, 2007 3:35 PM

Most of the comments so far seem to be coming from people in the Islamic World and to be commenting on their perspective of the United States (sorry if I've misrepresented anyone). I'll add an American perspective on perceptions of the Islamic World, particularly taking up from the US side Saif Shahin's point that the population has a quite different perspective than the government. I'm sure everyone who has contributed to this dialogue has a good knowledge, or at least strong feelings, about US government policies, but I have noticed somewhat less attention to what the population thinks even those such opinions represent an important determinant of US policy. I am perhaps relatively well placed among members of this list to comment on the US public, because I am, like the overwhelming majority of my fellow citizens, not an expert or even terribly familiar with the Islamic world, in all of its glorious complexity.

In that vein, the overriding feeling toward the Islamic world in the US is indifference. This indifference is reflected in the fact that Americans are generally unable to say which countries are Islamic or to locate those countries on maps. Sales of books about Islam and the Islamic world shot up after 9/11, but in retrospect they seem to have been more bought than read and apparently serve principally as doorstops and coffee table enhancements.

When this indifference is overcome, it is usually at moments of frustration and even anger. In this sense, to the extent that there is an image of the Islamic world in the United States, it is a very bad image. Americans, when paying attention, tend to see the Islamic world as an exporter of energy and violence--and not necessarily in that order. The Islamic World, especially its Arab heartland, is often seen as very out of touch with the historical trends that are creating ever greater prosperity and even liberty in the wider world. The Islamic world, in contrast to many other regions, is seen as glorying in atavistic ideologies that often impoverish and enslave in the first instance their own societies, but also create violence that threatens in an interdependent world to spill over into more other regions.

The Afghan and Iraq Wars were, it is true, understood as first and foremost wars fought for reasons of US national interest, but they were also viewed as efforts to bring the virtues of freedom and prosperity to nations that sorely lacked in both. The problems encountered in both places have strengthened the feeling that much of the Islamic World either is not ready for or does not want these benefits of modernity. This encouraged a desire, made possible by the citizenry's base indifference, for US disengagement from the Middle East and to a lesser degree from the wider Islamic World. Of course, that desire faces practical limits in current policy in the short-term and in the need for energy supplies in the long-term. But it has become a tenet of American political discourse that freeing the US from energy dependence on the Middle East is deeply desirable, specifically to allow the US to avoid otherwise unnecessary entanglements in a region whose only other export is violence. That remains a distant prospect, but recent technological, political and environmental developments make the dream seem somewhat more achievable than in days past.

This popular image of the Islamic World, like all such images, contains many unfair stereotypes and exaggerations, but also grains of truth. In any case, it is the reality that American policymakers have to deal with. The US government is, like all governments, fundamentally self-interested and, if judged by the standards of an individual, deeply hypocritical and immoral. It exists to protect the interests and reflect the desires and prejudices of its constituents whatever the costs to outsiders-- fortunately or unfortunately the US government does this even better than most governments. The current popular view that the Islamic World is beyond help may encourage less adventurism in US policy, but it will also guarantee very difficult relations, discourage American efforts on many of the issues that have cited in this dialogue, and may deprive the Islamic world of many of the benefits that other regions have realized from interaction with the United States and the West, including an impulse toward democratization. I imagine many in the Islamic world would view those outcomes as inevitable or even desirable. Anyone who doesn't should place as much emphasis on improving the Islamic World's image in the United States as on the reverse.

From: Akram A. Baker
Sent: Saturday, July 14, 2007 2:24 AM

On Jeremy's comments:

Well said, true, and very depressing if you happen to live in a majority-Muslim country (especially Arab) within striking reach of Uncle Sam (which means everyone). Take your choice:

1. Get bombed (maybe via Israel), contained, boycotted, and demonized on demand (or need); or,
2. Get with the program, love Israel, sell us all the oil we need, keep the crude trading in dollars, repress your people and any true democratic movement that doesn't "pledge allegiance to the flag" before breakfast.

It seems we have fallen on the wrong side of American history, at least during this generation. With any luck, China will take over as the boogie man and then we will be ignored for the most part. When this happens, we may have a fighting chance to clean up our acts at home. Either that, or a real revolution, who knows?

From: Elina Noor
Sent: Monday, July 16, 2007 10:21 AM

I want to pick up on Akram's point on China because China really is the elephant in the room in SEA, and Muslim SEA. China's soft diplomacy skills have been truly remarkable in this region and the US could perhaps stand to learn from some of its PD before it falls even further behind, rather than fear it/be threatened by its rise/be disdainful of it.

From: Michael O'Hanlon
Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 2:29 PM
Subject: Brookings Opp08—2nd set of questions

Q. How much of the responsibility for the poor state of US relations with the Islamic world, broadly defined, rests not just with Americans but with Muslims? A related question is, does the United States get blamed at times for too much, and doesn't it deserve a bit more credit for trying to help Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo and

Kuwait and elsewhere (militarily and otherwise) even if it sometimes is only partially successful in its efforts or belated in its attempts?

From: Waleed Al Banawi

Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 5:59 PM

I would agree a great part of the responsibility also rests with regimes of Muslim world - it's all about ethics and leadership!

There is a great socioeconomic dimension to rise of political Islam/Extremism throughout the region-e.g. Algeria, Gaza, Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia, and even in Saudi Arabia when in 1998 - price of oil went under \$10/barrel!

Obviously at root causes include widening gap between rich/ poor in many countries of Muslim world, a waning middle class - coupled with lack of proper education system, unemployment, poverty, corruption, governance issues, etc.

I also agree with your assessment that U.S has acted (in good faith) in other regions in helping Muslims- primarily on humanitarian causes (you mentioned Bosnia and Kosovo).

Sadly, it's only when it comes to Politics of the Middle East (where invariably religion— Islam -- is an inherent part of the way life here) where U.S policy direction gets skewed, according to major PAC interests acting in the U.S !!

From: Akram A. Baker

Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 5:53 PM

Power shapes relationships and even dictates them to a certain extent. In this light, the US, as the most powerful nation (at least in military/economic terms) on this earth, bears the overwhelming responsibility for the deterioration of the relationship. The fact of the matter is that like in any equation, both positive and negative influences/actions by the US are magnified if only by its sheer size. On one hand, I do not subscribe to the school of thought that says the US is "anti-Islam" as a religion. What the US is, is pro narrow-minded interests. As we all know, the US has always

needed a “Boogie Man” to focus is anger, whether it be communism, fascism, Iran, Allende, Noriega, USSR, Sandinistas, Castro, Saddam, Khomeini, North Korea, or Al Qaida. The true threat that any of these so called “adversaries” posed/poses to the US is absolutely irrelevant to the discourse which takes place.

In today’s world, the only way Iran can threaten the US is in the same way Iraq did in the late 1990’s; destabilize the Petrodollar. I believe that since the 1970’s, US policy in the Middle East has been always focused on the protection and continuity of the petrodollar - first, foremost, and to be defended at ALL costs. For more than controlling the flow of oil, the US NEEDS, in its own opinion, to control the currency oil is TRADED in. The first act the Provisional Coalition Authority in Iraq did, on the first day, was to reverse the decision by Saddam to sell Iraqi oil in Euros back to US dollars. It is why the US has supported dictators and despots throughout the region, doing everything it could to stymie democratic reform in the Arab world, and one of the main reasons why we are all in such a mess these days. With the flow of information no longer controlled exclusively by governments, people are finally realizing why they are in such a sad shape and at some point will take both their governments and their backers to task.

This does NOT excuse the lethargic attitude of the Muslim world. On the whole, we have not done what is good for us, regardless of what the West may say. I have always felt that we should have taken Bush up wholeheartedly on his “democracy crusade” because it is right and good for us. At the least it would have called the administration’s bluff, because based on the facts on the ground, I do not believe that the US truly desires freedom in the Islamic world (especially the Arab world + Iran). Why? Democracy could produce governments that might have a mind of their own. It is messy. And then the US would have to go about contradicting everything they claim to stand for, like they did in Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria, etc. Friendly authoritarians (benevolent or otherwise) have always been more preferable to the US than “unfriendly” democracies.

All I want is for you to ask yourself one question: What would happen to the US economy if Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran all started trading their national oil reserves in Euros instead of dollars?

And as for Kosovo and Bosnia, I definitely don't think that the US was out to save the Muslims. Out to counter Russians influence? Most probably. And do a good deed at the same time? Sure, why not. And Kuwait (that model of democracy), well, see the paragraph above.

From: Karim Makdisi

Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2007 11:38 AM

I don't think you can think in terms of a "Muslim" world (in terms of policy) any more than one can generalize about the "West". I think this is important to understand. In general, it is clear that any good actions or policies that the US has done in the Arab Muslim world has been over-whelmed by the negative side (in particular with regard to the denial of justice for Palestinians). It is also clear that most Arabs resent their own corrupt regimes--and blame them for much of the poor social and economic conditions, not to mention corruption, etc.--but in terms of broader politics they see their leaders as tools for the US. The US has done good work in (and as a result has huge support in the Arab world) terms of its educational systems for instance.

It is imperative to point out that most Arabs and Muslims can and do differentiate between US policies and the US people/culture/education system/etc. This is key to a revival of US relations with the Arab Muslim world.

From: Saif Shahin

Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2007 10:54 AM

The Islamic world is an extremely disjoint world of communities differing in ethos, languages, cultures and even religious conceptions, many a times so acutely that they are themselves at war with each other. Since the death of Prophet Mohammed one-and-a-half millennia ago, there has been no one whom the entire Muslim world has looked up to. Today, besides their belief in one god, in the Quran and in the prophethood of Mohammed, it is only the belief that they are victimized in the name of

Islam that is common to them all. How can all the members of such a world be responsible for its relations with any other community?

For the same reason, it will be very difficult for relations to improve if the US waits for Muslims to act first, end all forms of anti-West, anti-US terrorism everywhere and come to the negotiating table. For relations to change in practice, the initiative HAS TO come from the US, which is one nation that elects one representative every four years to speak on its behalf. If it does, I believe Muslims worldwide, in their own ways, will respond.

And yes, the US does get blamed a lot, for everything in fact. Bosnia and Kosovo are not perceived as US efforts to rescue Muslims, and Kuwait is seen as US military action against a Muslim leader, Saddam Hussein. We can continue arguing over Washington's true intentions behind these actions, but the 'suspension of belief' I mentioned in my earlier mail ensures that they are perceived negatively by Muslims.

From: Elina Noor

Sent: Monday, July 16, 2007 10:04 AM

I would agree that it is problematic to generalize. I won't repeat the points that have been made here; suffice to say that the truth is somewhere in between and blame cannot be apportioned to only any one side. Both the "Muslim world" and the "West" suffer from miserable PR because of poor decisions and actions by both sides. Each must bear their own responsibility and try to understand the dynamics that move the other to bridge the existing gap.

From: Michael O'Hanlon

Sent: Friday, July 13, 2007 10:35 AM

Subject: 3rd and final set of questions

Q. What do we do about the difficult state of affairs in relations between much of the Islamic world and the United States? I am hoping to prod a bit here and move beyond the general (though important) points already made, in this dialogue and by the Bush administration and others. We know we need attention to the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and some kind of progress in Iraq; we also know the united states has

already formed a few free trade pacts with Arab countries, increased aid to certain states like Pakistan, put a bit more pressure to democratize (at least in limited measure) on some non-democratic governments in the broader Islamic world, and appointed an under-Secretary of State on relations with the Islamic world? What should our next steps be?

From: Waleed Al Banawi

Sent: Friday, July 13, 2007 1:37 PM

Let me be a bit more daring in this closing remark: I believe the U.S needs to first visualize what the End Game (outcome) of its relationship with the Muslim world ought to be and then work backward according to a series of action steps that are deemed necessary to improve relations.

Frankly appointing "an Under-Secretary of State on Relations with the Islamic world", will not resolve key issues -i.e. the current (deep) misperceptions and distrust that exists today. What's more important is qualification (allegiance) of person who fills that post of Under secretary !! Take U.S policy on Palestine as an example, as long as it's articulated by Deputy National Security Advisor (no other than the neo-conservative) Elliot Abrahams, and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch, you'll never get objectivity on the critical issues confronting desperate Palestinians yearning for an independent state.

Bottom line: Over many years, The U.S administration had seriously miscalculated in its policy in the Middle East, including in confronting issues with the Muslim world!!!

In my honest opinion, U.S needs a Whole new telescope to see the Muslim world--A new pair of eyes! Also what is required is a massive reshuffle in key people (policy makers) involved in the Middle East/Muslim world - many that have caused the mess in the first place (the Richard Perle's, Douglas Feith, David Wurmser and the likes!!) That would be my first advice to an incoming U.S President.

More or else what's needed is a la Sarkozy Presidential team revamp (in the U.S administration) towards framing a new ME Strategy moving by engaging with political leadership with greater objectivity!

More important, AIPAC can continue to support and lobby Israeli interests in D.C., but so called protégés of AIPAC ought never "infiltrate" into key positions in the Administration as so called ME experts, and then end up sabotaging & driving U.S policy in the Middle East (including the Muslim World), with skewed eyes of pure Israeli interests in the region.

Enough said. - I don't think I can be more daring!

Truly, Thanks for giving us the opportunity to "Speak out" over the past few days - and share our candid opinion on such sensitive and deep issues.

From: Akram A. Baker
Sent: Saturday, July 14, 2007 3:02 AM

To: The President of the United States
1600 Penn. Ave
Washington, DC

January 23, 2009

Dear Mr./Ms. President,

Congratulations on your historic victory. As an American citizen who is also Muslim (and voted for you and donated to your campaign) and in order to forward the national economic and security interests of the United States, I would humbly recommend the following:

1. Immediately either pacify Iraq with 500,000 troops, really occupy it, run the damn place for 10 years (like we did Germany), build it up again in our own image, and then set them free. Alternatively, pull out the troops immediately, declare the war a complete failure and blame it on the guy who started it anyways. In Iraq, we have the worst of both worlds right now. You have a grace period of about one month, because

you should have been thinking about cleaning up this mess for the past two years at least. After that, you become part of the problem, not the solution.

2. Stop aiding autocratic regimes in the Middle East. They just don't work. People want freedom and they will get it somehow, someday. Best to be on the right side of history on this, we Americans will be rewarded with goodwill, good oil prices, and a lot of stability.

3. Force a settlement on the Israelis and Palestinians. We have the power, influence, and motivation. The framework of the settlement is known to all and while in the end, they will probably learn to live together in high tech heaven as one country for two people, they need a break from each other right now. So two states, for two peoples, free and independent. Quite simple, don't complicate it. This isn't a religious thing, Mr. Ms. President no more than Northern Ireland was. This may make you unpopular in the short term with the lunatic lobby and they will sling mud at you like you have NEVER seen before, but at the end of the day, if you pull this off (and you can if you have the audacity to hope!), you WILL go down in history as the greatest president since Lincoln. And that really means something. Sir, Madame, I know the aforementioned slogan was yours/the other guy's, but I really believe it to be true.

4. Restart those scholarship programs. You want to improve relations, let people see and feel what a great country we are, make them OUR ambassadors to the Islamic world (and the world at large), then put some of that extra money you are saving by ending the war in Iraq to giving scholarships to as many people as you can. These people will benefit everyone and it is a screaming shame the way we have closed our borders. Hell, its worse than shooting ourselves in the foot. I mean, come on Mr. Ms. President, weren't your college days just the best?

5. Give diplomacy back to the State Department. Whatever people may say, they do have a few folks there who are actual diplomats and know a thing or two about the world. And please don't make them praise you 500 times in every single speech any diplomat gives like the last President did. It was such a turn off, and made us look and

sound like Khrushchev's USSR. Let them do their work, you will find that they can deliver.

And one last thing, Sir, Madame. Please remember that we are the strongest country in the world. We are truly great and do not need to live in fear. Even in the toughest of times, we were able to radiate our greatness through our kindness, goodness, and a sense of optimism. We have almost always been an open and welcoming people, with the exception of few sad chapters in our history. You have a huge job in front of you, but you CAN do it. And trust me, you will find your people are right behind you.

Respectfully yours,

A. Muslim

From: Elina Noor

Sent: Monday, July 16, 2007 10:46 AM

What should the US' next steps be?

- Most importantly, listen hard to the grievances being aired and do something about them. Although there have been efforts in this direction, I still don't think there has been enough open and sincere communication between both parties, resulting in a significant amount of speaking at each other (rather than to each other) and a great deal of frustration. If Muslims are calling for a fairer solution to the Palestinian issue, then greater efforts must be made in that direction. I agree with Waleed's 3rd point in relation to this.

- Replace Under Secretary Hughes and/or her team with someone more credible - someone who has spent a significant amount of time in the Muslim world and someone who understands the diversity of Muslims. Best intentions aside, it's not effective to have someone who's just learning about the Muslim world try to fix relations.

- Increase P2P exchanges through scholarships, fellowships, the Peace Corps, etc. If I'm not mistaken, the US seriously lags behind Australia in giving out graduate grants

to students in SEA. Of course, this could be a function of geography but it is still something to consider. Indonesia is, after all, the largest Muslim country in the world.

- Although visa procedures have improved, there remains a continuous need for nuance and cultural sensitivity. I know of many, many Muslim - and even non-Muslim men - in SEA who, to this day, remain turned off by the idea of visiting the US after reactionary visa restrictions post-9/11.