

Bridging the Divide?

The Role of the American Muslim Community in U.S. Relations with the Wider Islamic World

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What is the role that Muslims can and should play in America's relations with the broader Muslim world? This is a question of supreme importance and urgency. It is of supreme importance to both America's legitimate interests and to the welfare of the Muslim world. It is of double importance to American Muslims who have a stake both as Americans and as Muslims. Yet, it is a question that could be asked not only by American patriots and Muslim devotees, but by special interest groups who have neither the legitimate interests of America nor the welfare of Muslims at heart, but who have narrower or foreign objectives, whether it be their own financial or political status, the fulfillment of a vision of America as the new Rome, or the interests of some foreign country.

These latter groups will want to know how American Muslims might be pressed into service in "selling" unpopular and unsuccessful American policies to their co-religionists abroad. I shall have no advice for those groups. I do not share their goals, and know objectives are, if not outright unattainable, certainly unsustainable. I do have some ideas on how the ideas and the civic potential of Muslims may be of benefit to American patriots who wish to see our country safe from terrorist threats, the American public safe from the demise of their civil liberties, and an end to the dissipation of their wealth in the service of destructive wars and authoritarian or apartheid regimes abroad. For them Muslims may offer succor and support in the fight to prevent this great republic from following the historical cycle into self-destructive empire.

In this talk I shall try to address the following questions: What do American Muslims have to offer in addressing the challenge of "bridging the divide?" What would Muslims have the government do? What can the Muslims do themselves to overcome the obstacles?

What do American Muslims have to offer in addressing the challenge of "bridging the divide?"

American Muslims offer an opportunity to demystify the "Otherness" between the Muslim world and Americans. As Americans can recognize in American Muslims fellow Americans, so Muslims abroad can recognize themselves in American Muslims. The

opportunity to meet American Muslims, especially in situations in which they are representing American institutions, goes a long way towards bridging a gap. This is especially true if the American Muslims are both assimilated into American culture and yet faithfully observant of their religion. Personal acquaintance with such people would alleviate the impression that American culture is inherently destructive of Islamic practice. The decision of American institutions to employ religious Muslims in such encounters would help to remove the impression that American institutions actively seek to suppress the religion of Islam.

American Muslims can complement interest groups whose agendas are incompatible with theirs. A one-sided perspective of events beyond our borders is dangerously misleading to policymakers. It is better to have access to all American perspectives to give a broader understanding of how foreigners may perceive American policy decisions. Reliance solely on non-Muslim observers of the Muslims world can be very dangerous, especially since non-Muslim observers may have their own agendas, not necessarily those that advance American interests.

American Muslims can be a sensitive early warning system against serious threats. American Muslims, more than any other segment of the American population, can be aware of developments that seem irrelevant or innocuous, but might in time become threatening.

The perspective of American Muslims can help to avoid costly policy errors caused by misreading the Muslim public. For example, most knowledgeable American Muslims, had they been asked, could have told US-AID that providing assistance to Fatah in the hopes that it would allow them to compete more effectively with HAMAS as a social service provider would backfire since Fatah's greatest weakness was its corruption. Just as Americans would be offended by large foreign grants to benefit American political campaigns, this incident only confirmed Palestinians' perceptions of Fatah corruption.

American Muslims can be an indispensable part of the vanguard of people-to-people exchanges of the sort proposed by Mohammed Khatemi, but impeded rather than exploited by the American government. When Khatemi was elected president of Iran, he called for direct intellectual, artistic, civil and cultural exchanges between the peoples of Iran and America. Rather than facilitate such exchanges, the administration has stalled them by forcing Iranian visitors to undergo humiliating border procedures and discouraging American from visiting Iran. The refusals to admit Cat Stevens and Tariq Ramadan have been propaganda disasters. Further, the fact that the real source of resistance to Tariq Ramadan's admittance is based on his views on Israel has been transparent to the Muslim world.

What would Muslims have the government do?

The government must immediately end its persecution of Muslims such as Sami al-Arian and the hundreds of "disappeared," etc. I was greatly encouraged by the statement by Assistant Secretary of State for Middle Eastern Affairs' comment that America does not want to see people silenced by imprisonment or exile. I was disappointed, however, that his response to my request that this policy be reflected in the release of Dr. Sami Al-

Arian from prison and the abandonment of threats to deport him met with the suggestion that the Justice Department's actions are outside the scope of the State Dept. When the Justice Department's actions make a mockery of State Department policy, it is not inappropriate for the State Department to let the President know this. But in any case Dr. Al-Arian is not an American citizen, having had his application for citizenship stalled because of the smear campaign against him. This most certainly is in the scope of the State Department, and failure to act sends a very powerful and negative message to the Muslim world. The State Department and the think tanks concerned with these issues should echo my advice to Attorney General Alberto Gonzales:

The efforts to advance democracy and liberty in the Muslim world confront many challenges, but few are as seriously obstructive as abuses of power to persecute politically active Muslims innocent of any wrongdoing, an activity that subjects Western notions of rule of law to the charge of hypocrisy. The prosecution of Sami Al-Arian has been Exhibit A, but the outcome of his recent trial gives the current Attorney General an opportunity to control the damage which his predecessor's decision to prosecute the case has wrought.

Since the propaganda campaign against Dr. Al-Arian kicked off by Stephen Emerson in 1994, and subsequently perpetuated by certain newspapers and politically motivated actors, no evidence has been produced that proves his involvement in any illegal activity. Not only has a jury acquitted him of eight of the seventeen charges against him, but also the jury deadlocked on the remaining charges because all but two of the jurors wished to acquit him on ALL charges. A retrial would aggravate a bad situation and further misuse tax money. Dr. Al-Arian's continued imprisonment has all the appearance of harassment.

It was a tragic mistake for the Justice Department to allow itself to be used against Dr. Al-Arian in this manner, yet the Bush administration can now minimize the damage to American credibility by dropping the charges against Dr. Al-Arian or at least releasing him while making a decision on what to do next. This opportunity to show that the American system of justice works in the end must not be passed up. To try Dr. Al-Arian again or to deport him would paint an unflattering enough picture of American justice. To incarcerate him under these circumstances politicizes the American legal process to the embarrassment of our history and tradition.

Dropping the charges against Dr. Al-Arian and releasing him would allow the Justice Dept. to redirect resources and prosecutorial power to the incarceration of criminals and real terrorists (whatever religion they happen to be) who threaten America's interests, an objective fully supported by all Americans including the Muslim American community.

The people who have been detained without so much as an admission that they have been detained, like the notorious “disappeared” of the fascist regimes of South America also provoke a climate of fear and distrust that impedes the potential engagement of Muslims in a constructive process.

America must return to its traditional stance in support of civil liberties, an unconditional opposition to torture as a matter of policy, and a commitment to rule of law—as in no wiretaps without a court order—of the same kind and degree as it suggests that it would like to see established elsewhere.

Ultimately, American foreign policy itself needs to be changed. Certainly American support of the dictators are the primary targets of the Muslim violence, compared to whom al-Qaida and others consider America to be “The Far Enemy” as discussed in Fawaz A. Gerges’s new book by that title.¹ To turn around and overthrow Saddam Hussein after first endorsing him and his war of aggression against Iran (not to mention his use of chemical weapons provided by America against the religious dissidents in his country) because he abused the weapons buildup we encouraged because he poses a threat to our allies cannot be convincingly billed as an example of our commitment to democracy, especially when the regime we have installed in its place seems, like the revolutionary animals of Orwell’s *Animal Farm* to be looking more reminiscent of their predecessors with each passing day.

The elephant in the room is America’s unbalanced support of Israel. It is certainly true that support of Israel isn’t the only problematic aspect of American foreign policy perceived by the Muslim world, but it is the largest problem and anyone who denies it is either ignorant, deluded, or disingenuous. If America wants to get knowledgeable and effective Muslim-Americans involved in and behind its attempts to broker a meaningful peace that will assure both Israel’s existence and the rights of Palestinians, it must abandon the position now in place that the Palestinian’s right of return, guaranteed by International Law, and which no Palestinian government or representative has the right to negotiate away, is somehow “unrealistic.” If it was unrealistic to expect the Jewish people to abandon their claim to the land called Palestine and Israel after 2,000 years, by what perverse standard can one think the Palestinians shall abandon their claims to it after less than sixty years?

What can the Muslims do to overcome the obstacles?

Muslims must become engaged in American civil society at all levels. Those Americans who have been least prone to blame all Muslims (or the religion of Islam itself) for the attacks of Sept. 11 have been those who have personal acquaintance with Muslims, especially in a civic setting. Such contacts are important at all levels from the local and state through the federal and international.

Muslims must avoid duplicity. Muslims do not serve their interests well by saying one thing to other Muslims and something else to the non-Muslim society around them. Why pretend that Islam is a pacifist religion when speaking to non-Muslims while calling for a holy struggle in the defense of Kashmir or Palestine when speaking to Muslims? The

¹ Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. (Cambridge Middle East Studies, 2005).

truth is that Islam is neither a religion of pacifism nor of aggression, but of justice. Saying this will elicit respect from most Americans, while a forked tongue elicits nothing but well-deserved contempt. A consistent, firm, and at the same time civil insistence on justice is the most important single thing that American Muslims have to offer to public diplomacy.

Muslims must actively oppose terrorism and bigotry. They should not only assist in the discovery and suppression of anti-American terrorism, but they must denounce on the spot any bigotry of the sort that may evoke such violence, including Muslim bigotry against Jews and Christians or Westerners in general. If a Muslim hears another Muslim say, “all Jews are enemies of the Palestinians” they should be quick to correct the record with names of Noam Chomsky, Rabbi Dovid Israel, and the late Murray Rothbard. If they hear someone say “All Christians are going to Hell,” they should point out the martyr Rachel Corrie, who gave her life trying to protect Palestinian property from an Israeli bulldozer. In every case they should quote the Qur’an: “Those who believe (in the Qur’an) and those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures) and the Christians and the Sabians and who believe in God and the last day and work righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.” (2:62)

Muslims must actively promote common values of America and Islam as such in their schools and in communications with their friends, relatives, and colleagues in the Muslim world. In an article for *Intercultural Management Quarterly*, I noted that although these common values are labeled with misleadingly different names in the two cultures, at root they are universal values. For example, the word “individualism” is detested by many Muslims as representing an extreme form of rejection of Islam’s concern for social justice. Yet the “archetypical American individualist is Henry David Thoreau, a man of intense spirituality, simple tastes, and an uncompromising concern for rights of all men. Like Thoreau’s transcendentalism, the Islamic concept of *tawhîd*, that none is worthy of worship except God, can be seen as individualistic when viewed in the same spiritual, modest, and egalitarian context. That is, that each human is directly responsible to the Almighty, a fundamentally individualistic perspective.”²

Muslims must form alliances with the many American religious and advocacy groups with harmonious objectives. We must support those Muslim institutions that advance an agenda that is pro-American without abandoning Muslim community’s core issues. We must initiate, participate in, and promote, people-to-people contact between Americans, including both Muslims and non-Muslims, and Muslims from abroad. Examples would include sponsoring exchange students (in both directions) and sponsoring and arranging visits to civic organizations, cultural exchanges, and interfaith dialog.

The government would be well advised to include Muslim Americans as consultants and participants in all aspects of its diplomacy with the Muslims world and with those foreign countries with significant Muslim populations.

² Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, “Common Civilizational Values as Perceived by an American Muslim.” *Intercultural Management Quarterly*, in press.

Conclusions

I strongly believe that the violence with which the world is wracked today, whether it be movement terrorism, state terrorism, or wars of aggression, is largely driven by a conflict, not between civilizations, as Samuel Huntington has argued, but WITHIN civilizations. Within Islam is a conflict between the hirabans (misnamed jihadists) on the one side and moderates on the other. (Hiraba is war against society; jihad is a struggle for any cause good or bad; jihad “in the way of God” is a struggle for a just cause.) Within American society the same conflict is taking place between the neoimperialists and the liberals (I use the word liberal here in its broad, classical sense). Bridging the divide means letting non-Muslim Americans and non-American Muslims see one another, and their cultures, close up, until they realistically understand their similarities and differences. Among the similarities is that within their own camps both groups must alike contend with power-hunger, with violence that is the inevitable tool of the power hungry, and with the ignorance and bigotry upon which the power-hungry feed. Once they realize this, both groups may attain the wisdom they need to work together against their common enemy.

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