



المنتدى الإقليمي لأمريكا و العالم الإسلامي
U.S.-ISLAMIC WORLD REGIONAL FORUM
October 13-14, 2008 KUALA LUMPUR

THE BROOKINGS PROJECT ON U.S. RELATIONS WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD



The Asia Foundation



at BROOKINGS





About the U.S.-Islamic World Regional Forum

The first *U.S.-Islamic World Regional Forum* was held from October 13-14, 2008, at the Imperial Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Sponsored by the Saban Center at Brookings' Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, The Asia Foundation, and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, the forum was designed to be a smaller, more regional version of the annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum that the Brookings Institution convenes each year in Doha, Qatar, in partnership with the State of Qatar. The regional forum focused specifically on the experiences and perspectives of Southeast Asian Muslims, who represent over 15 percent of the global Muslim population. It examined in depth how Southeast Asia's Muslim communities have grappled with the challenges of governance, human development, security, and economic growth that confront many Muslim-majority countries around the globe, as well as their relationship with the United States.

Opened by then-Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who provided the keynote address, the Forum brought together 50 key leaders from Southeast Asia, the broader Muslim world, and the United States for open and frank dialogue. The gathering featured large, public plenary sessions dealing with core issues affecting relations between the United States and Southeast Asia's Muslim states and communities. It also included smaller, off-the-record task force discussions, led by top experts and anchored in specific case studies, that focused on thematic issues of concern to both Southeast Asia and the United States: security, governance, human development, and trade and investment.



AGENDA

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12

9:00AM-12:00PM Registration/Task Force Sign-Up

6:00PM-8:00PM Country Briefing (Malaysia)

8:00PM-10:00PM Informal Dinner

MONDAY, OCTOBER 13

9:30AM-9:45AM Opening Remarks: The U.S.-Muslim World Relationship

9:45AM-10:15AM Keynote Address

10:15AM-10:45AM Coffee and Pastries Break

10:45AM-12:15PM Leaders' Briefing: U.S.-Muslim World Opinion

12:15PM-1:30PM Informal Lunch

1:30PM-3:00PM Understanding Islam in Southeast Asia

3:00PM-6:00PM Visit to Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

8:00PM-10:00PM Dinner Conversation: Looking Forward in U.S. Southeast Asia Relations

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 14

9:00AM-11:00AM Task Forces: Session One

11:00AM-11:30AM Coffee and Pastries Break

11:30AM-1:30PM Development and Reform in Muslim Asia

1:30PM-2:30PM Informal Lunch

2:30PM-4:30PM Task Forces: Session Two

4:30PM-5:00PM Coffee and Pastries Break

5:00PM-6:30PM What Have We Learned? Where Do We Go From Here?

8:00PM-10:00PM Cultural Dinner



The Rt. Hon. Dato' Seri Abdullah Bin Haji Ahmad Badawi, then-Prime Minister of Malaysia

KEYNOTE ADDRESS



Excellencies, Ambassadors and High Commissioners,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to commend the Brookings Institution, The Asia Foundation and ISIS Malaysia for convening the U.S.-Islamic World Regional Forum, an extension of the U.S.-Islamic World Forum by Brookings that is held annually in Doha, Qatar.

This regional forum is of significance because the Doha Forum is understandably weighted towards West Asian participation and perspectives. A Forum in Southeast Asia that also includes leading Muslim voices from South Asia restores balance—it engages the majority of the Muslim world, who are found outside West Asia.

Let me add that Malaysia is also in the forefront of such dialogues. The Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations organizes the annual International Conference on the Muslim World and the West. ISIS Malaysia is heavily involved in how to deliberate on issues of concern to Muslim-West relations. Malaysia's active engagement in this field is testimony to our belief in dialogue as key to building understanding, fostering trust and bridging divides.

Indeed, the belief in dialogues is extensive and universal. The number of conferences to discuss Muslim-West issues has proliferated in the wake of the horror of September 11. A Muslim-West dialogue survey conducted by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs of Georgetown University sampled 150 organizations, 30 programs and 13 events involved in Muslim-West dialogues.

This sampling gives some indication of the sheer number of dialogues on relations between the Muslim world and the West that are ongoing. More importantly, it demonstrates the profound concern that exists on both sides regarding the relations especially after the events of September 11 and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The number of dialogues notwithstanding, as well as other initiatives taken, it is clear that relations between the United States and the Muslim world have not shown perceptible signs of improvement numerous opinion polls and continuing incidents attest to this.

A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in March-April of this year, for instance, continued to find significantly negative attitudes toward Muslims in Western countries. The attitude towards the United States was also strongly negative in most of the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed.

The launch of the book, *Jewel of Medina* by American author Sherry Jones earlier this month created much dismay among Muslim in many countries. Muslims perceive this book as portraying Aisha, the Prophet Muhammad's wife, in a negative and irreverent light. Unfortunately, a sequel to the book has reportedly been written.

An extreme right-wing group in Cologne, Germany, proposed to hold an "Anti-Islamization Conference" in September to protest the construction of mosques and immigration of Muslims. It attracted far-right leaders from several European countries. The conference, however, was thankfully abandoned following street clashes.

Does this poor state of affairs signify that our dialogues are not effective in contributing to an improvement in the situation? Indeed, there are some quarters that believe so. The more cynical among them even doubt motives. They think that some dialogues are just substitutes for effective action. They are held to give an impression of doing something when in fact little action is intended. Some believe that dialogues are held to deflect attention from the continuing problems in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories.

Others think that the agenda of dialogues is stacked to focus discussion on the deficits of the other, and force them on the defensive. It is the other that is sick and needy of remedy, not the self. The dialogue is to assist the other to discuss its problems and how to solve them, and not to discuss our own role in contributing to the problem.

Dialogues are also criticized for apparently skirting the real issues, or as focusing attention on the secondary rather than the primary factors that are dividing Muslims and the West. This school holds that the real issues are political, like invasion, occupation and oppression. The core issues are not religious or socio-economic, though factors such as religion and poverty are no doubt exploited to support the cause.

I am happy to note that this regional forum, like the annual Doha Forum, cannot be faulted on these grounds. The forum in fact begins by squarely confronting opinion and perception towards the other in both the West and the Muslim world, including here in Southeast Asia. It also addresses the security and political issues that generate resentment and hostility, as well as issues of development and education that could aggravate the problem.

If I may, though, I wish that some space had been given in the program to address the role of the media. The media is too often a part, indeed a significant part, of the problem. It can do much more to contribute to the solution.

It is quite clear to me that in attempting to reconcile the United States or the West and the Muslim world, one must address not only the issues that divide but also the factors that unite. To address the one while ignoring the other will not get us very far.

If we reflect on Muslim Southeast Asia's relations with the West in general, and the United States in particular, we cannot ignore the burden of history. Muslim Southeast Asia, like the other parts of the region (except Thailand), was colonized by several Western powers. What were Muslim polities had their sovereignty violated, their independence wrested, and their resources exploited. Borders were redrawn and demographics were sometimes profoundly altered. Regaining our sovereign dignity and independence came only after great, often violent, struggle.

Yet Muslim Southeast Asia generally wears its painful colonial past easily. There is very little bitterness or enmity. Indeed, relations with the erstwhile colonizers are very cordial, close and cooperative. This is especially so in the case of relations with the United States and Britain. American and British rule and subsequent relations with independent Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, yielded some tangible political, economic and security benefits that have also been mutual.

When we assess the state of relations today between the Muslim-majority countries and regions of Southeast Asia and the United States, we will be struck less by a divide than by the powerful and diverse ties that bind them. The United States and Europe are among the most important trading partners and investors for Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. Millions of Muslim students study in Western institutions of higher learning. Western universities also have branch campuses in Muslim-majority countries. Western movies and music enjoy great popularity here.



We cannot but be impressed as well by the extent of cooperation in the security sphere. Muslim Southeast Asia is critical to the United States and indeed the rest of the world, because it girdles the strategic straits of Malacca, the Lombok and Sunda Straits and the South China Sea. There is close bilateral cooperation in security and defense matters between the Muslim-majority countries and the United States and other Western nations. Whatever our occasional differences, we must never lose sight of this bigger picture of sustained and mutually rewarding cooperation.

I would also like to add that our commitment towards eliminating terrorism and our cooperation in this sphere is nothing less than exemplary. Terrorism, in whatever form and from whatever source, is our common enemy. Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei are working closely with the United States and other nations in sharing intelligence and conducting surveillance. The United States is also assisting in valuable capacity-building.

As we well know, Malaysia has a policy of zero tolerance towards militants and terrorists, including terrorists who happen to be Muslims. We have disabled and fully neutralized Jemaa Islamiyah cells in the country. We continue to be vigilant against possible new elements emerging in the country or entering from outside our borders. I believe I can say the same for Indonesia and Brunei.

Muslims and Muslim countries unfortunately suffer from sweeping negative imaging in parts of the West. The Muslim world is often associated with authoritarianism, oppression, human rights abuses, gender discrimination, poor governance, backwardness, extremism, militancy and terrorism. Where they do indeed exist, however, it is clear that these problems have little or nothing to do with religion and faith. We can find enough examples of countries with such problems, or countries in even worse conditions, in Christian Africa, Christian South America, and non-Muslim Asia.

This negative profiling is especially misplaced and unfair with regard to Muslim Southeast Asia. Indonesia and Malaysia are healthy and performing democracies. Brunei's government is one of the most benevolent in the world. Brunei and Malaysia are ranked among the high human development countries by the UNPP. Women hold important positions in government and the administration, not to mention in the private sector. A Muslim woman was president of Indonesia. We cannot find many such examples in the West.

I would also like to add that the few instances of militancy and terrorism notwithstanding, the nature of Islam that we find in Southeast Asia is moderate, tolerant and



accommodating. It is also modern and forward-looking. Islam came to the region not on the tip of a sword, but through Muslim traders and Sufi missionaries. All the world's religions and places of worship are found in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Contrast this, if we may, with the Anti-Islamization Conference against the building of mosques in Cologne and other Western cities. We may then better appreciate the degree of tolerance and respect towards others that exists in Muslim Southeast Asia.

We cannot deny, however, that Muslims in this region do harbor negative feelings towards the United States and some other Western countries, just as the West has towards Muslims. The Pew poll this year, for instance, found that 55% of the Muslims polled in Indonesia had unfavorable views of the United States. The same would probably hold for Malaysia and among other Muslim communities in the region.

It is the central purpose of the Forum to understand what drives these perceptions, and what can be done to bridge the divide.

In searching for the answers, some of us look at the national education system and the kind of Islam that is taught in Muslim religious schools. This is understandable because the experience in a few countries has been that religious schools especially have been used to inculcate militant and anti-Western attitudes. Mosques are also used sometimes to criticize and attack Western policies.

The situation is not without its parallels in the West, where Christian fundamentalists and extreme right-wing politicians attack and condemn Muslims, including during sermons on the radio.

I am pleased to note in this regard that educational and religious institutions in Muslim Southeast Asia are not anti-Western in their orientation. Rare indeed are the

institutions like those run by Abu Bakar Bashir that engage in sustained anti-Western discourse. In fact, in my country you are much more likely to find religious schools that attack my party and my government, than the United States or the West!

I believe that to the extent that they exist, unfavorable views toward the United States are driven more by political factors than issues such as education. Among Muslims especially, the sixty year-old Palestinian issue and the invasion and occupation of Iraq would be among the major factors fuelling disenchantment and unhappiness. Dissatisfaction regarding these issues is not limited to Muslims only. It is also felt by many non-Muslims, not only in this region but throughout the world.

We cannot avoid addressing these issues, nor should we brush them aside, if we have a genuine desire to bridge the gap. The divide will prevail so long as the issues persist and Muslims feel that a fundamental injustice is being done unto them.

The Muslim-West divide, and especially the divide with the United States, was greatly aggravated by the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the events that followed. In Southeast Asia, too, terrorist attacks took place against the interests of the United States and its allies. These incidents were perpetrated by the al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah, and it is necessary therefore that we also address the issue of terrorism and its association with Muslim Southeast Asia.

In this regard, Southeast Asia is a good illustration of the fact that terrorism and militancy knows no religion, race or nationality. The communist part of Malaysia that launched a terrorist campaign which peaked in the late '50s and early '60s was essentially comprised of non-Muslim Chinese. The Communist Party of the Philippines is composed of Catholic Filipinos. The Khmer Rouge, who killed millions of their own civilian population, was made of Cambodian Buddhists.

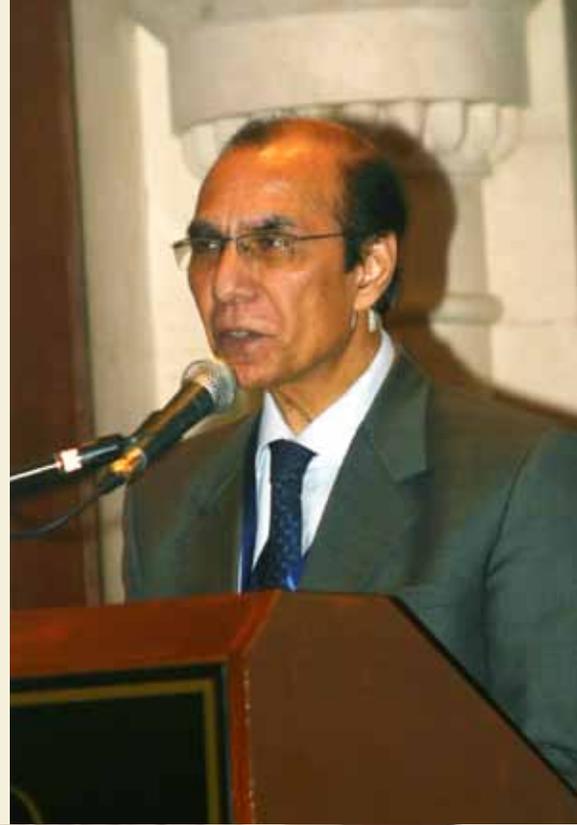
To read the rest of the Rt. Hon. Dato' Seri's keynote address, please click [here](#).



SOUTHEAST ASIAN
PERSPECTIVES

Muslims in Southeast Asia feel a sense of shared experience and religious solidarity with their brethren living in the historic core of the Middle East. As such, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ongoing “war on terror,” the potential for a nuclear Iran, and the stalled prospects for peace between Israel and Palestine continue to resonate powerfully with Muslims in Southeast Asia, and play a significant role in shaping their attitudes toward, and relations with, the United States.

However, the region remains distinct—with its own unique history, understanding of Islam, experiences with democratic governance, trade and security relationships, and parochial, local concerns. The United States and the broader Muslim world can learn a great deal from how the region has addressed religious extremism in its midst and countered terrorist threats, sought to advance economic development and consolidate fragile democratic political systems, and maintain social harmony in multicultural and often religiously diverse societies. Muslim Southeast Asia, at the same time, can benefit from being more tightly connected to the United States and the broader Muslim world, through more robust trade and investment, security, and cultural linkages.





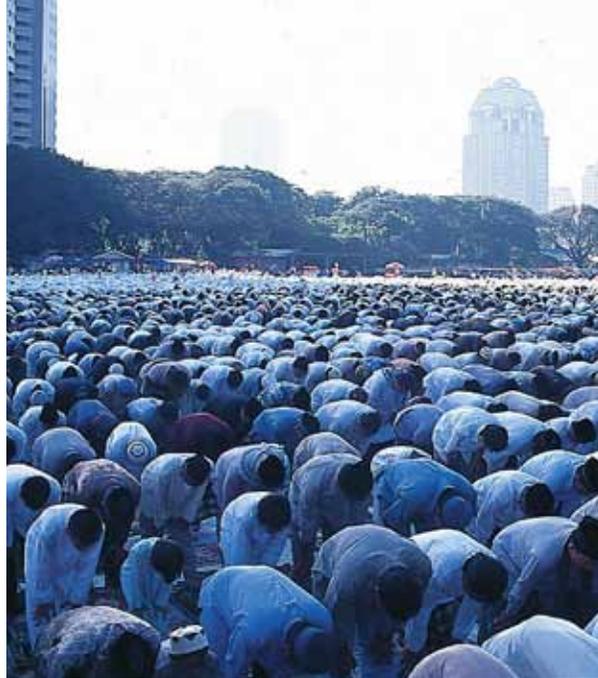
UNDERSTANDING ISLAM In Southeast Asia



Islam arrived later and manifested itself differently in Southeast Asia than in many other parts of the Muslim world. The religion was brought to Southeast Asia in the thirteenth century by Arab traders, rather than by military conquest as was the case in much of South Asia and the Middle East. As a result, the kind of Islam practiced in Southeast Asia has been much more syncretic in character, building upon rather than replacing existing local customs and beliefs. It also has been much more influenced by Sufism, the more mystical tradition within Islam.

While recent decades have seen the spread of Wahhabi schools and texts, funded by philanthropic organizations based in the Persian Gulf, the brand of Islam practiced in Southeast Asia continues to be both more modernist and mystical in its orientation, rather than literalist and conservative. Despite the significant inroads made in recent years by more conservative political groupings—aided by the negative reaction in the region to U.S. foreign policies post-9/11—the public discourse about Islam continues to be dominated by the moderate mainstream. The region’s governments seem to have effectively marginalized militant and extremist elements.

This is not to say that Southeast Asian society is becoming less pious or less Islamic—religiosity is on the rise in the region, just as it is in much of the world. In fact, Indonesia boasts two of the largest Muslim mass-based membership organizations in the world—Nadlathal Ulama and Muhammadiyah.



GOVERNANCE



“Southeast Asian Muslims appreciate American democracy, but see it as limited to an American domain. Southeast Asian Muslims hope that the U.S. will support the building of homegrown democratic institutions and practices all over the Muslim world, particularly in the Middle East, but not through military means--for that only further strengthens radicalism.”

Imtiyaz Yusuf
Chair, Department of Religion
Assumption University Thailand



Stereotypes and generalizations often distort the real state of democracy and governance in Muslim Southeast Asia. The movement toward more participatory political systems in the region is often mistakenly viewed as a shift toward an “American” or “Western” model of democracy, but Southeast Asians feel they are charting their own path. They recognize that their own political systems still have important deficiencies, but point out that citizens in the West remain critical of their own democracies and continue to clamor for improvements in their structures. The key indicator of success, for many Southeast Asians, is the belief that their government is acting in the best interest of the people and creating a system that reflects their collective needs. Many hope for a common foundation and framework of values to emerge that unifies their respective nation.

Indonesia provides an example of a Muslim-majority country that has made important headway in certain areas of governance and democratic development, but has not done as well in providing basic social services. The latter failure has left some questioning whether the ideals of democracy can provide a framework for helping families feed their children. Islamic organizations have been crucial in trying to address some of these social needs and are starting to be viewed as a partner by local governments in addressing these issues.



EDUCATION *and* DEVELOPMENT



In many areas of Muslim Southeast Asia, the madrassas provide the poorest quality of instruction to the poorest segments of society. The majority of students in the region attend public schools. However, for the very poor, the Islamic education provided by the madrassas is often the only affordable alternative. Eighty percent of the families who send their children to madrassas earn under USD\$2 a day; sixty percent earn under USD\$1 a day. Thus, poverty is made all the more endemic by a lack of educational opportunity. The kind of training available to the truly disadvantaged through the madrassas is not adequate to provide a pathway to a better future.

At the same time, there are forms of Islamic education in the region that are models of excellence and do serve to advance human development in the region. One example is the state Islamic university system in Indonesia, which has been at the forefront of curricula reform efforts in Indonesia. When ex-President Suharto was removed from office, for instance, the state dropped the requirement that state military doctrine be taught in the schools. It was the state Islamic universities in Jakarta that stepped in to make the change, not the premier secular research institutions. They developed the first real curricula that taught democracy, human rights, public participation, issues of pluralism and basic civics. These curricula were adopted and made mandatory by all 46 of the state Islamic universities, and also by the Muhammadiyah university system, which is itself comprised of 150 universities. An important part of the curricula have been participatory teaching methods and inculcating critical thought. Contrary to stereotypes, there is a diversity of forms of public and private education in the region, of varying quality. The quality of education that students receive tends to be stratified largely according to socio-economic status, rather than whether an institution has or does not have a religious affiliation.

Both in South and Southeast Asia significant progress has been achieved in promoting equal opportunities for women and empowering disadvantaged communities through innovations in micro-finance and the promotion of informal education. Mohammad Yunus's revolutionary microcredit program, for example, has broken down social barriers in Bangladesh, especially for women. These developments have, in turn, helped deepen participatory democracy in the region.

“The challenge today is to ensure that modern education can still be accessed by the majority of santris from all levels of Indonesian society. However...our educational system now serves to maintain the socioeconomic status quo.”

Anies Baswedan
President, Paramadina
University
Research Director, The
Indonesian Institute





TRADE



INVESTMENT



Reform and economic development in Southeast Asia could be enhanced by greater business ties with the Middle East. For centuries there were strong trade links between the Persian Gulf and South and Southeast Asia, but the subcontinent began to lose its allure for the Middle East in the 1950s. The expansion of the oil industry in the Gulf brought closer business relationships with the United States and Europe as the West became a major consumer of Middle East oil. The Gulf preferred to invest its surplus petrodollars in the West rather than Asia. Today, the Middle East is starting to look east again—savvy investors from the Gulf see Asia as a resource-rich region with untapped market potential—but it remains to be seen how the current financial crisis will affect the growing trade relationship between the Middle East and Asia.

Southeast Asia also has an interest in securing sources of energy and finding profitable markets for their exports. Southeast Asia is newly attractive to investors from the Middle East for several reasons. Since 9/11, visiting the United States and Western Europe has become increasingly difficult for foreigners. In addition, Asia, especially China and India, are growing between 8 to 10 percent annually, and although those rates might decrease in the future, those countries currently remain likely to outperform the West. About 60 percent of the Gulf's total exports now go to Asia. Trade between the two regions is growing at about 40 percent annually. A number of Gulf companies have opened up factories in Southeast Asia.

Investment flows still lag behind trade flows, as only about 11 percent of foreign direct investment from the Gulf goes to Asia. The future of the trade and investment relationship will largely depend on the outcome of the current financial crisis. It is clear, though, the Gulf will still have trillions of dollars to invest overseas. Also, in looking at terms of trade and finance measures, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries are quite integrated. Intra-regional trade has risen from 35% in 1980 to 60% in 2007. This is a result from the expansion of regional supply networks for manufactured goods centered in China. Furthermore, East Asia's trading relationship with other regions of the world has increased from 14% in 1980 to 29% in 2007.

A NEW
**AMERICAN
ADMINISTRATION**





Relations between the United States and the Muslim world deteriorated dramatically in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and Southeast Asia was no exception. Muslims in Southeast Asia feel a sense of kinship with their brethren in the Arab heartland, and empathize with the plight of displaced Palestinians and Iraqis. The U.S.-Islamic World Regional Forum occurred just weeks before the 2008 elections in the United States. The election of a new American president was viewed as a moment of great opportunity for the United States and the Muslim world to recast their mutual relations in a new, more constructive and cooperative direction. Both the United States and Muslim-majority states and communities, it was recognized, have a profound interest in getting this important relationship right.

The importance of stronger ties, both in the economic and security realms, between the United States and Southeast Asia was emphasized. Greater U.S. investment and trade would provide a boon to development and reform efforts in the region. On the security front, the United States could learn a great deal in its efforts to counter terrorist groups like Al Qaeda from the experience of Southeast Asian states in grappling with militant extremists within their midst.

CONCLUSIONS





There were several points that emerged during the Forum of note to policymakers:

- 1) The Southeast Asian experience underscores the rich diversity of peoples, practices, and perspectives within Islam, because the form of Islam practiced in the region manifests itself so differently from that practiced in the historic heartland of the Gulf. Among the world's approximately 1.3 billion Muslims, there are modernists, rationalists, mystics, traditionalists, strict scripturalists, and militant extremists, and everything in between. Islam, like so many other religions, has a set of sacred texts and religious practices that have been passed down across the generations. Overlaying these, however, in each society, are often local cultural traditions and contemporary circumstances that ultimately determine how those texts are interpreted, and which religious practices are followed.
- 2) In many of the conflicts that divide the United States and the Muslim world, it is politics rather than religion that is the driver. Our differences in approaches to conflicts like Iraq and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict reflect differences in political perspectives, shaped more by interests and identities than by differences in religious doctrine. The solutions to many of the conflicts that divide us are therefore similarly political in nature rather than religious.
- 3) In finding political solutions to these conflicts, the importance of dialogue across political groupings and national boundaries cannot be underestimated. Inclusiveness and participation tend to moderate the agendas and appeal of extremist groups. Ignorance and misunderstanding that arise from the absence of dialogue are as often impediments to cooperation as real clashes of interests.
- 4) The Southeast Asian experience demonstrates that democracy and Islam are in no way incompatible. Since the fall of Suharto, Indonesia has developed into one of the world most populous democracies. Malaysia has taken important strides in recent years toward multi-party democracy, though challenges remain. The Philippines and Thailand, which both have significant Muslim minority populations, have decades-long histories of democratic rule, albeit with grave setbacks along the way.

- 5) Good governance is central to addressing many of the problems that bedevil Southeast Asia's Muslim communities. As in other parts of the Muslim world, problems of corruption, insecurity, and extremism are often associated with limited state capacities and poor government performance. Improving education and upgrading the quality of human capital in the region offer the best long-term prospects for improving governance.
- 6) The experience of Southeast Asia's Muslims holds many lessons for the broader Muslim world, and for U.S. policymakers. The region has enjoyed some notable successes in addressing many of the challenges confronting the Muslim world as a whole, such as improving economic development, combating extremism, enhancing the quality of and public participation in governance, empowering women, and deepening regional integration.





PARTICIPANTS

UNITED STATES

HADY AMR

Fellow and Director, Brookings Doha Center, Saban Center at Brookings

FAYCAL BOUCLAGHEM

General Manager, Unlimited Potential Group, Microsoft Asia Pacific

ANN FLORINI

Visiting Professor and Director, Centre on Asia and Globalisation National University of Singapore Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution

STEPHEN R. GRAND

Fellow and Director, Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Saban Center at Brookings

ELIZA GRISWOLD

Fellow, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

CARI E. GUITTARD

Executive Director, Business for Diplomatic Action

GORDON HEIN

Vice President of Programs, The Asia Foundation

SHAMIL IDRIS

Acting Director, Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations

MARTIN INDYK

Senior Fellow and Director, Saban Center at Brookings

JAMES R. KEITH

U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia, Department of State

STEVEN KULL

Director, Program on International Policy Attitudes

KRISTIN M. LORD

Fellow, Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Saban Center at Brookings

J. COBB MIXTER

Professional Staff Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House Representative

CARLOS PASCUAL

Vice President and Director, Foreign Policy Studies, Brookings Institution

DAVID ROCKS

Senior Editor, *Business Week*

CYNTHIA P. SCHNEIDER

Nonresident Senior Fellow, Saban Center at Brookings, Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy, Georgetown University

SHIBLEY TELHAMI

Nonresident Senior Fellow, Saban Center at Brookings Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, University of Maryland

BRUCE J. TOLENTINO

Director, Economic Reform and Development Programs, The Asia Foundation

ASIA

ABDUL AZIZ IBRAHIM

Member, Transparency International *Malaysia*

M. AMIN ABDULLAH

Rector, State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, *Indonesia*

AHMAD AL FARRA

Senior Fellow, ISIS *Malaysia, Malaysia*

ANIES BASWEDAN

Rector, Paramadina University, *Indonesia*

BAHTIAR EFFENDY

Professor, State Islamic University – Jakarta, *Indonesia*

BAMBANG HARYMURTI

President Director, PT. Tempo Inti Media, Tbk., *Indonesia*

HAMID BARRA
Professor, Mindanao State
University, *Philippines*

JOHN BROWNLEE
Program Director, Islamic
Organizations and Development
Program, *Indonesia*
The Asia Foundation

AHMAD SOMBOON BUALUAN
President, Thailand Centre
for Muslim Democracy and
Development, *Thailand*

ROBIN BUSH
Deputy Country Representative,
Indonesia
The Asia Foundation

BEN D. DOLORFINO
Armed Forces of the Philippines–
Marines, Philippine Navy, *Philippines*

ESMAEL EBRAHIM
Executive Director, Society for
Family Development and Education
of the Philippines, *Philippines*

FYZUL ADZWAN MUSTAPHA
KAMAL
Special Officer to the Managing
Director, Khazanah Nasional,
Malaysia

HASMY AGAM
Executive Chairman, Institute of
Diplomacy and Foreign Relations,
Malaysia

MOHAMED JAWHAR HASSAN
Chairman and CEO, ISIS Malaysia,
Malaysia

MOHAMMAD HASHIM KAMALI
Chairman and CEO, International
Institute of Advanced Islamic
Studies, *Malaysia*

KOMMARUDIN HIDAYAT
Rector, State Islamic University,
Jakarta, *Indonesia*

LILY ZAKIYAH MUNIR
Director, Center of Pesantren and
Democracy Studies, *Indonesia*

M. DIN SYAMSUDDIN
President, Central Board of
Muhammadiyah, *Indonesia*

M. SYAFI' I ANWAR
Director, International Center on
Islam and Pluralism, *Indonesia*

MASDAR FARID MAS'UDI
Director, The Indonesian Institute
for Pesantren and Community
Development, *Indonesia*

ISHAK MASTURA
Deputy Executive Secretary,
Office of the Regional Governor,
Autonomous Region in Muslim
Mindanao, *Philippines*

MUHAMMAD KHALID MASUD
Chairman, Council of Islamic
Ideology, *Pakistan*

MOHAMAD DAUD BIN HJ. DOL
MOIN
Assistant Governor, Central Bank of
Malaysia, *Malaysia*

DANAI MOOSA
Senior Policy and Planning Analyst,
National Security Council, *Thailand*

ANTHEA MULAKALA
Country Representative, *Malaysia*
The Asia Foundation

MUSA HITAM
Chairman, World Islamic Economic
Forum, *Malaysia*

NASHARUDIN MAT ISA
Deputy President, Islamic Party of
Malaysia, *Malaysia*

SURIN PITSUWAN
Secretary-General, ASEAN, ASEAN
Secretariat, *Jakarta*

AMINA RASUL-BERNARDO
Managing Trustee, Magbassa Kita
Foundation, Inc.
Lead Convenor, Philippines Council
for Islam and Democracy, *Philippines*

STEVEN ROOD
Country Representative, *Philippines
and Pacific Island Nations*
The Asia Foundation

MUSHIR UL HASAN
Vice Chancellor, Jamia Millia
Islamia, *India*

STEVEN WONG
Assistant Director General, ISIS
Malaysia, *Malaysia*

YUSRI MUHAMMAD
President, Muslim Youth Movement
of Malaysia, *Malaysia*

IMTIYAZ YUSUF
Chair, Department of Religion,
Assumption University, *Thailand*

MOHAMMED ZAMIR
Former Secretary, Ministry of
Foreign Affairs, *Bangladesh*

MIDDLE EAST & EUROPE

M. ABDULLAH MUTIB
AL-RUMAIHI
Assistant Foreign Minister of Follow-
Up Affairs, *Qatar*

FARES A. BRAIZAT
Researcher, Center for Strategic
Studies, University of Jordan, *Jordan*

AMR GOHAR
CEO and Managing Director,
National Telecom Card Company,
Egypt

MOHAMED HASSAN GOHAR
CEO, Video Cairo SAT, *Egypt*

HISHAM A. HELLYER
Principal Research Fellow, Institute
for Advanced Islamic Studies,
Visiting Fellow, ISIS Malaysia
Fellow, University of Warwick,
United Kingdom



The Asia Foundation

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- (1) Defence, Security and Foreign Affairs.
- (2) National and International Economic Affairs.
- (3) Nation-Building.
- (4) Science, Technology, Industry, Energy and Natural Resources.
- (5) International Understanding and Cooperation.



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Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a major research program housed within the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The project conducts high-quality public policy research, and convenes policy makers and opinion leaders on the major issues surrounding the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project seeks to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on developments in Muslim countries and communities, and the nature of their relationship with the United States. Together with the affiliated Brookings Doha Center in Qatar, it sponsors a range of events, initiatives, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and the Muslim world.

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