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Brookings Project on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World

Bridging the Divide?

The Role of the American Muslim Community in U.S. Relations

with the Wider Islamic World

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In seeking to improve relations between the United States and the Muslim world, the role of the growing community of Muslim Americans is potentially of great significance. There is an emerging consensus among the American policy community as well as leadership within the traditional Muslim world, that this community constitutes an important common ground between Islam and the West. Thus, a pertinent policy question is the role that the American Muslim community might play in helping bridge the growing divide between the United States and the Islamic world.

On December 13th, the Brookings Project on US Policy towards the Islamic World at the Saban Center convened a diverse set of 40 policymakers, key leaders, and experts to explore the potential role that the American Muslim community might play in advancing and improving overall US foreign policy. Representatives from the US Government, the wide variety of American Muslim groups, American Muslim foreign policy experts, and the DC think-tank and policy community were in attendance. The session explored the potential space for the American Muslim community to assist and advance US policy towards the Islamic world, capabilities within the community that might be better tapped, and the role that the American Muslim community is playing in American politics and the shaping of foreign policy.

The meeting opened with remarks from Brookings non-resident fellow Muqtedar Khan. Khan discussed the conception of the idea for this forum at the Doha conference and the pressing need for American Muslim input in US policy towards the Islamic world.

Shibley Telhami, a Brookings non-resident fellow, continued the session by citing the findings of several recent surveys of Arab attitudes towards the US. They demonstrate that attitudes towards the US in the Arab world are characterized by a complete collapse of trust. For example, in the year 2000, sixty percent of Saudis had a level of trust towards the US. Today, that number is in the single digits. When asked what the reasons are for US Actions in Iraq, Arabs continuously respond that oil and Israel are the main motivators, and that the US is seeking to weaken the Muslim world. Second, there has been a rise in “Islamic nationalism” as an identity. For example, ninety percent of Turks, a NATO ally, did not support the war in Iraq because it was seen as



targeting a Muslim country. Also, Arabs admire leaders who exhibit Anti-Americanism such as Gamal Abdel Nasser and Jacques Chirac. Third, surveys indicate that Arab-American attitudes towards the US are similar to attitudes in the region in that they exhibit a lack of trust towards the US government's actions in the Middle East. Finally, the polling demonstrates that media is not as influential in shaping views as often thought.

Peter W. Singer, Director of the Brookings Project on US Policy towards the Islamic World, opened the first session entitled "American Muslims' Role in US Islamic World Relations." He discussed how the Project hoped that this first meeting on such a vital but under-explored issue would serve as both a convening and catalyst. Not only will it serve to inform on-going research and policy, but also will hopefully connect key players and spur development of potential positive avenues of cooperation and outreach with the Muslim world.

The session sought to explore the variety of policy questions that derive from the role that the American Muslim community might play in helping bridge the growing divide between the United States and the wider Islamic world:

1. How can the community work with the broader American policy community and policy makers to better provide the American Muslim perspective on American foreign policy?
2. How can the American Muslim experts and community leaders be better integrated into America's national security and policy network?
3. The expertise and potentially greater legitimacy that American Muslims enjoy can potentially be of enormous benefit to American efforts at diplomacy. How can the US State Department and the White House better connect with this pool of potential citizen diplomats for their public diplomacy missions to the Muslim World?
4. What sort of policy input can be provided to American policy makers to ensure that policies towards the Muslim World safeguard American interests without unnecessarily worsening relations with Muslim countries?
5. Ignorance and misperceptions trouble already difficult relations. How can American Muslim leaders and groups better their educational outreach –both in educating Americans about Islam and the diversity within the Muslim World, but also in educating media and leaders from the broader Muslim World about America?

In short, how can America leverage the strength of its diversity, rather than treating it as a vulnerability?

Adam Erel, Deputy Spokesperson of the US State Department outlined the goals and approaches of the US government and the ways in which American Muslims could work with the US government. US government goals are to promote democracy, stability, and prosperity. To meet the challenge of countering extremism and building trust, the US State department has sought to provide a compelling, alternative vision of opportunity, participation, and change. In particular, it believes in the importance of television targeting and recognizes the role of youth and women as "swing audiences" that might be influenced through access via media and exchanges with the US. The American Muslim community can help the US government in several ways: 1) helping to "de-demonize" the US, 2) leading by example and showing the people in the region what is possible in a democracy, including by actively seeking to get on Arab media to help better represent the US and counter conspiracy theories, 3) bidding on projects through NGOs to build civil society and educational reform, including seeking out MEPI grants, and 4) engaging in more public/private partnerships.

Sulayman Nyang, professor at Howard University, discussed how 9-11 led to a coagulation of hostile attitudes towards the United States across the Muslim world, as opposed to an earlier variance. Historical factors affecting attitudes towards the US include US inconsistencies in the region in democratization, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the support of monarchies. With 9-11, Muslim Americans face the challenge of operating under a constant cloud of suspicion. In particular, Nyang warned about the role of “spoilers,” including Muslim, Jewish, and Christian fundamentalist who seek to prevent the opening of space and positive discussion. He also emphasized the need for the US to understand case by case nuances of responses to modernity in different regions of the Islamic world and develop the US’s “moral currency” in order to build trust and affect change in the region. One mechanism is the expansion of Muslim Americans in the bureaucratic process, as well as more Muslim American ambassadors.

Farid Senzai of the Institute for Social Policy Understanding discussed what he believes is the problem in US-Islamic Relations and how to address it. Ignorance on both sides has contributed to hostile attitudes. Eighty percent of Americans know nothing about Islam or have hostile attitudes towards Islam. Likewise, many in the Muslim community have refused to accept the role of Islamic extremists in September 11th. Another issue is the need to improve relations without using propaganda such as Radio Sawa where the messenger is deemed illegitimate or giving money to secular and western groups that do not have legitimacy in the Islamic world. There is a need to establish a dialogue with humility, respect, and compassion on both sides and to act on what each side has heard because it is the policies and not the values that are most important. Senzai recommended a number of changes to address these problems. First, the creation of a public diplomacy advisory board that could recommend policies to the US government would give trust and legitimacy to policies making them more likely to be accepted abroad. It should serve as more than just a sounding board but be involved in the policy formulation. Second, it must be made clear that this is not a war on Islam and American Muslim diplomats could best convey that message. Third, the US should expand the reach of aid programs beyond the already likeminded. It can learn from the French and UK aid programs with the Muslim world in that Europeans have more legitimacy. Fourth, the US should play a more balanced role in the Arab Israeli conflict. Fifth, American Muslims must begin to identify and deal with those who incite hate, including within their own community.

The session then turned to general discussion. The first question dealt with what the deliverables are needed from American Muslims from the perspective of the US government. It was suggested that American Muslims need to engage in more public private partnerships and exchanges such as the Fulbright and even seek to create new ones. American Muslims can serve as spokesmen on Arab media and create partnerships with NGO counterparts in Muslim countries. The second question dealt with how the US could specifically raise its “moral currency.” It was argued that the US should let each country democratize in their own way, just as France, Great Britain, and the US’s democracy emerged differently.

The general discussion then turned to issues such as civil liberties hindering American Muslims and the legitimacy effects of the Abu Gharib and Guantanamo. There were also recommendations made on how to improve MEPI grants by creating an advisory board that might also include non-Americans, to help build in local expertise and credibility, and the initiation of outreach programs into the American Muslim community to help expand the partnerships beyond the usual suspects in the DC realm. These could seek to educate people about MEPI opportunities and assist them in the application process obtaining MEPI grants.

Islam Siddiqui, former Under Secretary of Agriculture, led a luncheon discussion on “Capabilities within the Community and Foreign Policy.” He listed a number of steps that could be taken to reestablish trust between the US and the Islamic World as well as critical questions for American Muslims to answer. Steps to reestablish the trust include President Bush spending his political capital on solving the Arab-Israeli conflict, waging the war on terror with greater precision, and stopping the harassment and intimidation of Muslim

figures such as Yusuf Islam or Tariq Ramadan. He also emphasized that in policy discussion, American Muslims should be consulted before not after the fact. Critical questions for American Muslims to answer are whether or not Muslims will enter into meaningful dialogue with other groups, how they can better speak out publicly against extremist violence, and the need to reinterpret Islam in the 21st century reality. He suggested that American Muslims should become more involved in think tanks and that Muslim American students benefit greatly from interning in Washington DC to learn about policy making, an experience that can be expanded.

The session then turned into a general discussion. The major issue discussed was that American Muslims do not want to be seen as agents of, or spokespersons for, any bad policy because they will themselves be delegitimized. American Muslims want to help shape the policy. There was some discussion about whether or not American Muslims will gain more credibility and influence later if the community works with policies they do not agree with now. Another issue was the political maturity or immaturity of the American Muslim community and the need to become more involved in the Republican and Democratic parties and contribute to campaigns. It was also argued that the tack taken by many leaders in the community of constantly demonizing American policies has disempowered American Muslims.

Muqtedar Khan chaired the final session “American Muslims and the Shaping of American Politics and Foreign Policy.” He opened by pointing out the many successes of American Muslims in establishing community relations, protecting their identity, and, indeed, even changing the religious and visual landscape of America (he noted the scores of mosques that dot the skyline in states like Ohio and Michigan). He also pointed out though that by contrast, American Muslims’ have failed to impact American foreign policy even though it is American Muslims’ number one concern.

Salam Marayati of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) discussed MPAC’s counterterrorism campaign and proposed guidelines for defining “moderate” views. The counterterrorism campaign involves an illustration of Islam’s message against extremism, working with law enforcement to make a counterterrorism model, and developing mosque guidelines for speeches. Marayati proposed five guidelines for “moderate” views. First, a moderate must reject terrorism as an instrument of change. Second, a moderate must reject the term “kafir” used loosely to dehumanize Christians and Jews and instead use the term “ahl el kitab” or people of the book. Third, a moderate must believe in the emancipation of Muslim women because God has given them political and social equality. Fourth, a moderate must respect human rights of all people, regardless of their religious beliefs, because Islam preaches human dignity. Fifth, a moderate must reject the blind imitation of scholars of the past and apply Islam in the modern era. Marayati also discussed the lack of Muslim presence in government in the counterterrorism and foreign policy departments. He also pointed out that the image of Islam in America is directly related to the image of the United States in the Islamic world. Respect is a prerequisite for effectiveness. Presently, there exists a respect for Islamic rituals in among policy leaders, as expressed by hosting Iftar dinners, but not enough respect for political rights, as expressed by extensive detentions.

Zahid Bukhari, professor at Georgetown University, discussed the findings of two American Muslim polls, which revealed four key characteristics of the American Muslim community. First, American Muslims are a diverse group. Thirty six percent are born in the US, while eighty percent are born in other countries. One fifth are converts to Islam and sixty percent are African American. Second, September 11th has forced the speeding of a natural integration process, whereby political involvement is necessitated far sooner than has been the case with other immigrant communities. American Muslims have had to catch-up quickly in the political spectrum, at least a decade earlier than the process would have been otherwise. Third, the American Muslim Community is, in fact, a relatively politically mature and aware community. Ninety percent of those polled think American Muslims should get more involved in US politics and ninety percent give money to non-Muslim

candidates and organizations. Fourth, the American Muslim community is an intellectual, well-educated community. The main issue that confronts American Muslims is whether they are here simply to change American foreign policy or to be a part of the larger landscape. There is a need for American Muslims to engage issues other than foreign policy, to work at the grassroots level on community boards, and to be involved in the nomination process at all levels.

Hady Amr of the Amr Group spoke about the need to engage in the political process. American Muslims need to recognize they have excelled in business, but have not succeeded as much in the political process. The community needs to seek to involve itself more, but also requires a helping hand from established structures. The import of this is that it is in the strategic interest of the US, in terms of security and the ability to succeed in the war on terror, for American Muslims to participate in the political process. Although the community still has a distance to go, it is learning fast and should make it a goal to integrate in the political process in the next five years. The concurrent changes within the Democratic Party structure presented an opportunity. Amr challenged the participants to come up with way to operationalize the various concepts discussed on a practical level.

The session then turned to a general discussion. The Republican Party was described as open to meeting with Muslims, but also had a relative lack of Arab or Muslim presence in the structure. There was described a particular need to be more aggressive in educating policymakers whose first interactions with Islam was September 11th.

The discussion then shifted to what this forum could do in the next months to improve the situation. First, think tanks like Brookings can serve as a buffer and bridge between the community and the government. As non-governmental organizations with access to government policymakers, they can serve as useful convening bodies. Second, study is needed of to bring research rigor to the question of American Muslim presence in appointed positions and key staffing positions in government. Third, joint projects can be initiated with smaller institutions to create access to relevant policy makers among more specialized groupings, such as for example, the issue of expanding NGO involvement with aid and development contracting such as in MEPI. Fourth, think tanks can alleviate the cloud of suspicion over the Muslim community through their own legitimacy.

There were also several recommendations made by participants for action inside the American Muslim community. It was suggested that American Muslim youth should be encouraged to study social sciences such as journalism and international relations and engage in policy internships, with a programmatic question being how to operationalize such programs. American Muslims should also be more involved in USAID contracting and partnerships, especially since fifty percent of the USAID budget is allotted to development projects in Muslim states like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. Also, American Muslims need to remind American citizens that allowing visas for students is crucial for America's security. American Muslims can also engage in the political process, such as by playing a role in the Democratic Party's reinvention post election 2004. There was also discussion about the need to become greater involved at the local grass roots level as process to leadership at the state and national party levels. A community activist from Wisconsin discussed their successes in community participation and suggested that barriers are not the problem but that the true challenge is enlisting the participation of American Muslims. There is a need to engage problems such as fear and intimidation by law enforcement officials and ignorance of Islam. Internal reform in the community involves a need to change the discourse and involve more youth and female leadership. American Muslims can bring about internal reform by engaging the mosque, not disassociating from it, and instituting mosque guidelines with effective khutbas.

Peter W. Singer closed the session by outlining several themes that have emerged from the discussion. First, there is a shared frustration, both on the part of the US government and the leaders of the community. This frustration with the status quo is actually an opportunity for change. Second, a key question is deciding which stage of the policy process American Muslims would seek to involve themselves, and understanding the tradeoffs that incur. Third, the challenges, from micro-level issues like spreading better understanding of grant application processes to macro-level questions of Islam's stance on violence, repeatedly involve the need for a learning process. This actually makes the problems more amenable than one would expect. Finally, the discussion exhibited the challenges of inclusiveness and exclusiveness that have characterized Muslim American issues since 9-11. In talking about subjects ranging from the community, the US government, the political parties, and the wider Muslim world, descriptives ranged from an inclusive "we" to a disconnected "you" or "they." These signify the flux and often uncertainty in relations and status at this time.*

*The views and opinions presented in this summary do not necessarily represent those of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy or The Brookings Institution.