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REPORT



# ISPU

## How To Improve the United States' Image in the Muslim World



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Over the last few years he has met and a number of world leaders and governments on a diverse range of issues ranging from financial investment, geopolitics to countering extremism. He has most recently been asked by the Government of Pakistan to take a key role in authoring a new National Economic Strategy.

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*Pakistani Muslims burn a US Flag during a protest in Lahore on September 19, 2010, against earlier threats by US pastor Terry Jones to burn copies of the Muslim Holy book, the Koran.*





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*Afghan children gather in front of their newly built school.*





## Executive Summary

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The premise of this report is that engaging with Muslim publics is increasingly important, for advancing technology is empowering individuals and groups to threaten the American homeland's security – sometimes from the comfort of their own homes.

The rise of terrorism and cybersecurity threats – threats not from foreign governments, but from foreign populations foreign-based groups or individuals means that there is now a security incentive to engage with those populations in order to reduce their motivation(s) to attack the United States.

Improving the United States' image with Muslim publics serves to narrow the pool of radicalized young people from whom terrorist groups need to recruit if they are to survive. "Public Diplomacy," defined as engaging with Muslim publics as distinct from Muslim leaders, is an essential way to do this.

Before engaging international Muslim publics, however, it is advisable to listen and analyze their opinions and values so that any engagement will be successful. This should be done based on evidence, not conjecture. The evidence, in fact, shows that most Muslims around the world do share US values (even when they cannot enjoy such benefits themselves), particularly democracy. They are, however, alienated by its actions, with many seeing the United States as a military threat. American policymakers must understand this to strike the right tone when trying to address them.

This report interprets the lessons from the history of international public diplomacy and then applies them to the challenge of engaging Muslim publics. Thirteen wide-ranging suggestions are made for improving the United States' image in the Muslim world. Among the recommendations are that the United States specifically focus on trying to encourage the freedom of speech, plurality of opinion, and defense of digital freedoms in those regions, because one of its largest strategic opportunities is the fact that both Muslims and Americans share the value of freedom of speech. By actively pursuing policies that promote this value, along with those of free debate and the plurality of opinion, the United States not only improves its own image, but also helps Muslim-majority countries follow their own path toward democratization.

It is also important to remember that the United States is not alone in trying to influence these countries' political direction. Multipolarity is now an accepted reality (at least outside the United States), and other potential competitors (such as China) are investing in soft forms of outreach to the Muslim world. The United States' ability to promote an attractive political alternative to non-democratic Muslim-majority countries cannot be taken for granted.

Ultimately, American foreign policy should aim toward a world in which improved understanding between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds leads to good relations, improved trade, cultural relations, and travel. The Muslim world has a rich culture that can be explored, and both it and the US could be enriched by greater dialogue and understanding. But the longest journey begins with the first step, and the first step in this case is to prevent the Muslim world from becoming a threat to US security.

*President Obama meets with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on his first visit to Turkey.*



## Why Should the United States Care What the Muslim World Thinks of It?

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In June of 2010, a group of angry protestors gathered near Ground Zero in New York to rally against a proposal to build a Muslim community center nearby. The center was – and is – intended to be a focal point for both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the area, one guided by Islamic principles but open to all. It is, in other words, to be devoted explicitly to the values of tolerance and good relations. Even so, the proposal has attracted protests from those who were enraged by the idea that anything having to do with Islam was going to be built so close to Ground Zero. One of the protestors held a sign that read: “All I need to know about Islam I learned on 9/11.”

This report sets out to explain why and how the United States should, in the coming years, seriously engage the Muslim world. But as this vignette illustrates, such an engagement will falter unless those who advocate it are able to address a domestic question that logically precedes it: why should the United States care what the Muslim world thinks of it?

Many people, both at the grass-roots level and in the political class at federal and state level, hold similar sentiments. And it is their government (and, potentially, their tax dollars) that may be spent on this engagement. Many others, however, feel that they have made up their minds about Islam and Muslims and that engagement is the wrong path.

Over the last decade, this has been a significant weakness of the United States’ attempts to engage the Muslim world. Poor domestic understanding of why such a course of action is worthwhile has been part of the reason for its failure. “Listening” tours of Middle Eastern countries are easily undermined by reports of racism or cynicism back home toward Muslims both in the United States and abroad.

This report argues, in short, that those committed to this engagement should not take for granted that the general American public or even the political class understand why such an undertaking is worthwhile in the first place. They cannot assume that they are automatically entitled to a hearing. Rather, they must be prepared at all times to explain why the United States should care what the Muslim world thinks of it.

It is that question which the first part of this report seeks to answer.

This part first analyzes the changing global defense and security environment in which the United States finds itself, taking into account both traditional and non-traditional challenges. It then deals with radicalization and the changing dynamics of Muslim demography over the coming decades. It concludes that trends in both areas point to the need for the United States to engage positively with Muslim-majority countries.

## Defense and Security

The Obama administration's first national security strategy, published in May 2010<sup>1</sup>, both identified a wider range of threats to the American homeland's future security than did previous strategies and also expanded the number of policy tools that would be used to address them. Nuclear proliferation, al-Qaeda, the economic crisis, and climate change were identified as real threats, and it was suggested that future national defense strategies would be best served by moving away from a traditional military defense toward one based on counter-insurgency.

Also emphasized was the need to use diplomacy as a key to the country's future defense in a way that recent national security strategies had not envisioned. This report follows the lead of this document in identifying how successful engagement with the Muslim world can contribute to the United States' national security and further its international security goals as set out in that document.

In addition, this report defines the United States' power in the world as "the ability to achieve goals." This is an important departure from the definition of power in purely military terms. The previous decade has, we believe, demonstrated the limits of military force to achieve the country's stated goals. The Bush administration's stated goals of capturing or killing Osama bin Laden; spreading democracy in the Middle East; and achieving a stable, legitimate, and pro-Western government in Afghanistan with effective sovereignty over the majority of its territory were not achieved despite significant expenditures and deployments of military force. This leads the authors of this report to believe that military force alone is not an effective measure of global power. A more appropriate one would seem to be the ability to achieve goals, whether the means used to do so are military or diplomatic.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf)

This point is important because while the necessity of engaging the Muslim world is of little relevance to furthering American power, as defined by the projection of military force, it is absolutely crucial to furthering the country's power as defined by the ability to achieve its international goals, particularly where they concern Muslim or Muslim-majority countries.

### **Traditional Interstate War**

Nobody would argue that engagement and diplomacy could prevent a state that was determined to launch a military attack on the United States' allies or interests from doing so. However, there has been no such conventional interstate military threat in recent decades. And the evidence is that positive engagement can help the United States diffuse the kind of tension that might lead to military challenges to its global interests. From George H. W. Bush's "coalition of the willing" to support the first Gulf war to the progress made by Pakistan in tackling militants in its North West Frontier Province, to the engagement of Libya in 2007, examples abound of how the Muslim world can provide allies to help the United States achieve its stated goals if it is handled carefully and sensitively.

On the other hand, recent history also offers clear evidence that when the United States defies international opinion, it becomes less able to achieve its goals – and thus less powerful. Its leverage in international fora declines, and most states become increasingly willing to defy it. The best example of this is the isolation it suffered after its invasion of Iraq in 2003, after which many Muslim governments factored in the domestic cost to their own legitimacy of being seen to help the United States. A straight comparison with the breadth of the pre-Gulf war "coalition of the willing" against Saddam Hussein versus the contraction in international support for the United States in the years following the invasion is instructive. The latter undertaking weakened American power both at the UN and in bilateral diplomatic efforts. This negative development could have been avoided, however, if the diplomatic disadvantage of not engaging Muslim states had been factored into the decision-making process that preceded and directly followed the invasion.

Such a weakening of American power can – and must – be avoided in the future.

Instructors teaches Pakistani girls about music through The Pakistan America Peace Through Music Project.



## New Security Challenges

One striking feature of the post-cold war world has been the decline of major interstate war (defined as “organized and publicly authorized violence between established states involving a minimum of 1,000 casualties”). In his 2005 book *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, Raimo Väyrynen remarks<sup>2</sup> that while interstate wars still break out fairly regularly, they have not kept up with the rise in the number of states. Thus the likelihood of any particular state being involved in an interstate war is lower than it has probably ever been since the treaties of Westphalia in the early eighteenth century. The second half of the twentieth century has seen no sustained wars at all in Europe, North and South America since 1945, 1916, and 1942, respectively. Most significantly, his figures show that “the probability or risks of war for any state in an average year have declined significantly since the era of early modern Europe, from one chance in 59 in the period after the Westphalia Treaties (1648 to 1714) to only one chance in 250 today.” Clearly, the possibility of major war remains, but the chance of United States security being threatened by a major war is probably lower than at any point in its history.

It is likely that 9/11 will, in future decades, be seen as marking the start of a new era of asymmetric threats to American security, which the 2010 National Security Strategy describes. This chapter discusses the effect of engaging the Muslim world on three such asymmetric threats: terrorism, cybersecurity, and nuclear proliferation.

## Terrorism

Terrorist threats, including those from radical groups of Muslims, are attractive to their proponents both because of the damage they do and of the message they send. Traditionally, American thinking has focused on military victory over terrorist groups, killing or capturing ringleaders, and denying them safe haven and access to finance. This approach has worked up to a point – there have been no major terrorist attacks on American soil.

The nature of such threats coming from Islamic radicals has undergone a paradigm shift since 9/11. Intelligence services in the United States, the United Kingdom, Holland, Denmark, and Sweden all agree that it now comes mainly from freelance cells inspired by al Qaeda. Such “self-starter”

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cells initiated the attacks in London in 2005, Madrid in 2004, and Casablanca in 2003.

The key to understanding this change is to understand that al-Qaeda now seeks to inspire as much as to organize. In line with its claim to be conducting half of its war through the media, videos of its attacks are often put online by al-Shabab, its dedicated media branch. Its propaganda video releases are also increasing, from one every two months in 2002 to one every three days or so in 2007. It has even launched videos designed for mobile phones. The implication of this shift is that policymakers must stop thinking of terrorist groups as somehow analogous to centralized “companies” and start thinking of them as ad-hoc groups of self-starting freelancers from the worldwide pool of Islamic radicals.

The implications of this shift from a company model to a freelance model are profound. Unlike companies, freelance radicals can move across borders, the survivors can disband and regroup at will, and can be coordinated remotely. Inspiration and know-how can be disseminated, and plans can be formed online between radicals who no longer need to meet each other. This is particularly important, for as the costs of media production fall and media penetration into poorer regions around the world rises, terrorism (including chemical and biological terrorism) is likely to become cheaper and more attractive as a tool for manipulating mass opinion. One only needs to look at the incredible rise in the number of mobile phones per head in Africa over the last decade, for example, to see the growth of the potential “market” for al-Qaeda’s media efforts.

The most crucial implication of this paradigm shift, however, is that since any given terrorist can now be replaced with another one, any given terrorist group cannot be decisively defeated. This fact calls for a change in how governments address terror.

There is only one way to beat Islamist terror in the long-term: over decades. That is to reduce the motivation for young Muslims to radicalize in the first place. Governments must redefine “success” when it comes to fighting terrorism. Military objectives achieved or plots foiled are insufficient. Even if radicals from one region are inactive in the short term, they may be replaced by another generation of radicals ten or twenty years later. There is no military solution to this – it is a question of reducing their motivation to strike against American interests. And for that to happen, the United States must find the proper way to engage with the Muslim world.

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*The key to understanding this change is to understand that al-Qaeda now seeks to inspire as much as to organize.*

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The strategic advantage for the United States and its allies from this “freelance” approach is that the links leading back to the organization’s core are weaker, for they are composed of inspiration and ideological support rather than of finance and instruction. So if that ideological picture can be undermined, the desire to participate in violent extremism can be undermined as well. But the only way to accomplish this long-term goal is to reduce the pool of radicalized young people who are willing to commit terrorist activities. By failing to factor in how its actions affect its image in the Muslim world, the United States is likely to increase that very pool and, by default, the risks to its homeland security.

## Cybersecurity

In the years before 9/11, the United States regarded the threat of a major terrorist attack as a real, but peripheral, challenge. On 9/11 the peripheral challenge became the central security threat of the decade. One lesson to learn from this is not to take such “peripheral” challenges lightly, as they are liable to become the next central security threat.

Cybersecurity is one such challenge. In fact, it is likely to overtake terrorism as the number one threat to the United States’ critical infrastructure over the coming decades, even if it continues to lag behind terrorism as a threat in the public mind.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, such attacks can come from anywhere, for the lack of conventional military power is no barrier. Conversely, there are relatively low barriers to entry relative to the damage that can be done. This trend is likely to continue with the rise in access to computers and computer literacy around the world. Then there is the attractiveness of conducting a potentially devastating attack anonymously with the associated attractions of evading capture or punishment – the reduced risk to the protagonist compared to other forms of attack. Moreover, protagonists can attack more flexibly, quickly, and with minimal institutional preparation or a shorter decision-making process than states or formalized terrorist groups require. Certainly, there are no deployment time lags of the kind associated with traditional military deployments.

Cyberattacks also blur the line between national security threats by a foreign government, military, or individuals or groups acting without links to any state organization, for three reasons. First, given the ability to mask the attack’s origin, there is often no way to identify it with certainty,



making such distinctions all but irrelevant. Second, it would likely be in any government's interest to use individuals or groups to conduct the attack. And third, the difference in capability between a state-sanctioned and an independent attack is narrowing, as such know-how disperses. Another factor is that the grievance triggering such an attack can be perceived as well as real. The fact that foreigners can, if determined enough, now translate their opinions into cyberattacks on critical American infrastructure means that defending against such an amorphous threat must involve trying to reduce the motivation(s) to attack in the first place. States such as Estonia have fallen victim to devastating cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, and Chinese hackers have gained access to sensitive information from the Indian government, including NATO deployment plans and the Dalai Lama's personal emails.

The Obama administration has made attempts to counter this threat by setting up a "Cyber Command" headed by Keith Alexander, a four-star general. However, the means of defending against this new threat will necessarily be radically different from those designed to defend against more traditional threats. To begin with, there are no laws and norms of war in cyberspace. Second, it is likely that any such rules would be unenforceable, for the threat is global, cross-border, and impossible to police in any way that would be analogous to traditional policing.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the range of targets is limited only by the attacker's imagination. As well as military targets, a wide variety of critical national infrastructure, both public and private, is vulnerable. A strike on the power grid, for example, would affect other vital systems, among them communications systems and cash dispensers. This has led Michael Clarke, chairman of United Kingdom's defense think tank The Royal United Service Institute, and other analysts to propose a new definition of the threats against which any national defense system should defend populations: threats to the country's "way of life."

It is, however, impossible to completely defend against such a diffuse and amorphous threat. This report argues that alongside efforts such as that of US Cyber Command, over the coming years and decades the United States should seek to reduce the pool of potential attackers in the first place. As far as the Muslim world is concerned, the first step in this direction would be undertaking an active and strategic engagement of the kind that this report advocates.

## Summary

The argument contained in this report as to why the changing security environment increases the need to engage the world's Muslims is the same for both terrorism and cyberthreats – and with good reason. These new national security threats have one aspect in common: they do not come from foreign governments, but from foreign populations – whether individuals or groups – themselves. This radically changes the kind of security calculations that the American government will have to make in the future. It will also have profound consequences on how the money allocated to making Americans safer is spent.

Crucially, there is now a security incentive to engage with those populations, to reduce the motivation to become – or to remain – hostile toward this country. America must care what the Muslim world thinks of it simply because doing so makes the homeland safer.

## Radicalization and Demographics

Over the coming decades, demographic trends will make it more urgent for the United States to engage Muslim-majority countries. This section will explain why.

Radicalization, defined as the process by which an individual comes to hold extremist views that permit and often encourage (often spectacular) violence, is a foreign policy challenge for the United States precisely because it takes place inside the minds of young people living far beyond the reach of this country's traditional foreign policy tools. However, research conducted on this process over the years provides us with some insight into how foreign policy and the government can begin influence it, even across borders and in foreign countries and cultures.

Marc Sageman, a former CIA operations officer, has conducted the largest survey of radicalized terrorists to date in order to locate the causes for radicalization. In a groundbreaking study, he analyzed over 500 profiles and concluded that radicalization normally occurs in four distinct stages:

1. It is sparked when the individual reacts with moral outrage to stories of Muslims suffering around the world.

2. For some, that spark is inflamed by an interpretation that explains such suffering in the context of a wider war between Islam and the West.
3. The ensuing resentment is fuelled by negative personal experiences in western countries (e.g., discrimination, inequality, or just an inability to get on despite good qualifications).
4. Finally, the individual joins a terrorist network that becomes like a second family that is closed to the outside world. This situation stokes the initiate's radical worldview and prepares him or her for action and, in some cases, martyrdom.

The crucial stage that turns a radical into someone willing to commit violent or otherwise destructive acts is the point at which a young Muslim begins to believe that Islam justifies violence and closes his or her mind to other viewpoints.

## Responses

In a domestic context, a country can promote education in authentic Islam to cut any radical ideology off at the roots. This approach challenges radical misinterpretations of Islam, such as those that explain Muslim suffering in terms of a Manichaean war between Islam and the West or those that teach that Islam condones violence. In the context of radicalization overseas, however, the United States is not qualified to fill this role. Indeed, any such education it tries to offer will lose its credibility on the street by association with the US. So what can America do?

The key lies in stage two of Sageman's progression. The strong pattern of radicalization uncovered by his study shows that at that stage, an initiate comes to believe in a wider all-encompassing war between Islam and the West.

It is well within the power of the United States to make this belief almost impossible to hold. The belief in a Manichaean struggle between the United States and Islam is supported by irrationally drawing incorrect conclusions from real evidence. This is, for example, why President George W. Bush's comment about a "crusade" to liberate Iraq was such an extraordinary blunder and resonated so strongly with those for whom the words referred to a war between Christians and Muslims, and with those who wanted to interpret the Iraq war in such a context.

*Obama with King Abdullah  
at the king's ranch in the  
outskirts of Riyadh.*



What the United States does have the power to do is to make sure that it is not seen as an enemy of Islam itself. Rhetoric is crucial to this, but actions are even more important. The United States must, in other words, concern itself with what the Muslim world thinks of it because there is a correlation between that opinion and the size of the pool of radicals available for recruitment to terrorism.

### **Demography**

For demographic reasons, the number of potential radicals will rise. Therefore, the need for the United States to concern itself with its standing in the Muslim world will become ever greater over the coming decades. The number of Muslims in Muslim-majority countries who become radicalized is quite small. The number of those who go on to commit violent acts is a minority of that minority.

However, the larger the pool of radicalized Muslims in any given area, the easier it is for terrorist groups to recruit. It follows that if the United States can discourage ordinary Muslims from radicalizing in the first place, it will reduce the pool of available radicals and make it harder for terrorist groups to find new initiates.

Three trends will mean that ever more Muslims will live in conditions that are fertile ground for radicalization. First, there will continue to be a bulge of young people in Muslim countries. Islam is now the fastest-growing religion in the world. Today, there are 1.3 billion Muslims; by 2025 there will be 1.8 billion.

Terrorists tend to be young males. This is intuitive: younger people tend to have fewer ties (such as a young family) that might inhibit them from taking the risks that terrorism inevitably involves. However, by 2025, there will be 9% more Muslim males 15 to 24 year-olds than there are today. That is the prime demographic for terrorist recruitment. Periods when there is a demographic bulge of young people often correlate with periods of political violence.

The second reason is that large populations hinder counterterrorism efforts by making state surveillance and policing more difficult. Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, and Egypt—some of the fastest-growing in the world – can expect to find the task of policing terrorism to become even harder unless motivation is reduced.

The third reason is that many more young Muslims will be living in weak or failed states, another important condition for insurgency. It is no coincidence that Osama bin Laden chose Sudan and Afghanistan as bases. Weak states are unable to provide the security, stability, and opportunity that discourage young people from radicalizing. These demographic trends mean that if contemporary policymakers do not try to reduce the motivation to radicalize, their successors will find it even more difficult. These trends make it more urgent for the United States to engage Muslim countries.

An example of how the lack of sensitive engagement can have adverse effects is instructive. The strategic conception of “a war on terror” made sense for various segments of the American population; in the Muslim world, however, it was less successful. It also divided the very international allies it sought to unite and, “made people think terrorism was something you could deal with by force of arms primarily,<sup>3</sup>” It also implied that a clear-cut victory against terrorism – which is, after all, a tactic – is achievable.

Governments cannot address radicalization and terror unless they are – and are seen to be – united behind one strategic conception of the challenge they face. This requires a narrative that, unlike “the war on terror,” can win legitimacy with governments and populations alike that, in turn, necessitates working multilaterally toward articulating a long-term strategic stance against terrorism – one that can win support in Western and Muslim countries alike. It is also in the long-term interests of all governments to take into account how they affect global Muslim opinion.

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*The strategic conception of “a war on terror” made sense for various segments of the American population; in the Muslim world, however, it was less successful.*

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3 According to Dame Stell Rimington, former head of the United Kingdom’s MI5

## Conclusion

The future security challenges facing the United States differ fundamentally from those it has faced in previous decades. The relative decline of interstate war and the relative rise of terrorism and cyberattacks, combined with a rise in the number of young Muslims who are the prime targets for the radicalization that is the precondition for terrorism committed by radicalized Muslims, both mean that Islamic terrorism will continue to be a significant security challenge for the United States.

Today, we know more than we have ever known about how radicalization works. It relies on the ability of preachers and others to invoke a Manichean war between Islam and the West. In the same way that the Marshall Plan successfully engaged Europe after the Second World War, by successfully engaging the Muslim world in the coming years the United States has the power to fatally undermine such a narrative and reduce the pool of radicals from whom terrorists can be recruited.

The United States must care what the Muslim world thinks of it because doing so is the first step to making this country a safer place.

## How the Muslim World Sees the United States

Before engaging international Muslim publics, it is advisable to listen to and analyze their opinions and values so that such an undertaking will succeed. This should be done based on evidence, not conjecture.

Probably the deepest and most comprehensive survey of the Muslims' general opinions was conducted by the Gallup polling organization between 2001 and 2007. It was based on interviews with 50,000 Muslims from thirty-five countries (covering the Middle East, South and Central Asia, etc.).<sup>4</sup> Its central finding of concern to this report is that the conventional American wisdom that Muslims worldwide feel overwhelmingly negative toward the Western world is false. If anything, the reverse is the case. As Gallup put it: "When Muslims were asked what they admired most about the West, only 2% in Iran, 6% in Saudi Arabia, and 10% in Egypt said 'nothing.'"<sup>5</sup>

The research also holds important implications for how the United States should improve its image. It shows that the vast majority of Muslims distinguish between the United States' stated values and its actions. Most of those polled share its values but are alienated by its actions.

The two aspects that they most admired about the West were its technology and democracy. (Strikingly, the same two aspects are named as the most admired by Americans). Only a small minority condone acts of terrorism. And strikingly, the research found that Muslims around the world in fact admire the American values of freedom and a strong work ethic.

It also found a clear response to the question of what was resented. At the top of the list was the denigration of Muslims and Islam, as well as the portrayal of Muslims as extremists. A close second was concern about an American invasion or dominance. This latter perception is borne out in smaller polls conducted since President Obama took office. A recent Pew Global Attitudes Project from June 2010<sup>6</sup> reported that "while views of Obama are still more positive than were attitudes toward President Bush among most Muslim publics, significant percentages continue to worry that the U.S. could become a military threat to their country."

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*The most comprehensive poll of global Muslim opinion found that most Muslims share the United States' stated values but are alienated by its actions.*

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<sup>4</sup> Published as 'Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think' by Professor John Esposito of Georgetown University and Dalia Mogahed, a senior analyst and executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies.

<sup>5</sup> Although when Americans were asked the same question about the Muslim world, fully 32%—nearly a third—of respondents said "nothing."—<http://www.muslimwestfacts.com/mwf/105652/Muslims-Americans-Way-Forward.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Obama More Popular Abroad Than At Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit, available at <http://pewglobal.org/files/pdf/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Spring-2010-Report.pdf>

The headline trend for recent years has been a higher approval rating for the United States during President Obama's first year, as he sought to abandon some of the previous administration's most inflammatory policies, followed by a fall in 2010. Speculation is rife as to what caused this drop. Most analysts cite the slow progress in the key issues of withdrawing American military personnel from Iraq, closing Guantanamo Bay, and American efforts to broker peace in the Middle East, compounded by a war in Afghanistan that is rapidly losing support as well as drone strikes along the Afghan-Pakistani border that routinely kill civilians and are a particular source of grievance in Pakistan. This would appear to bear out the findings of the deeper Pew study that American unpopularity stems not from American values, but from American actions.

The loss in popularity between 2009 and 2010 are widespread across the Muslim world. The following is a sample of recent findings:

- President Obama's approval rating dropped by 10 points in Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt.
- In Pakistan, the president's personal approval rating is now at 8 percent.
- Roughly six-in-ten (59%) Pakistanis describe the United States as an enemy, while just 11% say it is a partner.
- The percentage saying they trust President Obama to do the right thing in world affairs is 43% in Lebanon, 33% in Egypt, 26% in Jordan, and 23% in Turkey.

It is clear that large parts of the Muslim world were alienated by the actions of President Bush and, that although buoyed by the rhetorical promises of President Obama in 2009, they have been disappointed by the reality in 2010.

It is always a challenge to try to derive policy lessons from polls, as most limit respondents' possible responses and do not give enough data to enable policymakers to understand respondents' reasons for their opinions.



This report, however, argues that the polling in Pakistan – one of the countries under the most clear and present danger from Muslim extremists – does illustrate one clear lesson: American policymakers cannot assume that countries threatened by Muslim extremists automatically support American efforts against them. A spring 2010 survey of Pakistan<sup>7</sup> revealed that Pakistanis do not, on balance, think it makes a difference whether the Taliban or the United States eventually controls Afghanistan: 25% thought it would be bad for Pakistan if the Taliban regained control, as compared to 18% who said that it would be good; 27% thought it would not matter and 30% who had no opinion.

This is important, because although the American deployment in Afghanistan has often been justified rhetorically in the name of keeping the region safe from the baneful influence of extremism, large numbers of Pakistanis do not share that particular perception. It is telling that nearly two-thirds of Pakistanis say they want American and NATO troops to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible. In other words, even though support for violent Muslim extremism in Pakistan is low, that does not translate into support for American aims. Under these circumstances, it is not so surprising that so many Pakistani respondents say they see the American military presence as a threat to their country – a perception that feeds into the wider fear of American domination of the Muslim world.

### **What do Muslims say would improve their perception of the United States?**

Traditionally, policy discussions about how the United States might improve its image have taken place within the terms of American political debate (with those on the Right more likely to emphasize force, and those on the Left more likely to emphasize diplomacy and multilateralism). This approach carries two risks. The first is of looking at the question while wearing our own partisan blinders. The second is of looking at the question through the prism of ideology and not evidence.

This report argues that such approaches are not useful. We prefer to use such data as is available about what Muslims themselves have to say on what the United States could do to improve their perception of it.

<sup>7</sup> by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project

*A Soldier from Co. C, 2nd Bn., 27th Inf. Rgt. hands out Skittles candy to Afghan children on Dec. 22 in Khezer Kheyl, Afghanistan.*



A 2008 Gallup poll in ten predominantly Muslim countries<sup>8</sup> asked respondents to rate the importance of two specific policies – withdrawing troops from Iraq and closing Guantanamo Bay – and to rate actions relating to more general social improvements having to do with economic development, technology, poverty, and governance. Respondents were asked to rate these on a five-point scale, where 1 meant “not significant at all” and 5 meant “very significant.”

The following information was revealed. Residents of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Territories, Tunisia, Turkey, and Algeria were the most likely to say that withdrawing the troops from Iraq would improve their opinion of the United States very significantly. Of those, over half of the respondents in five countries rated this action as having the highest possible level of significance. This is consistent with what we have seen in the deeper attitude polling about Muslim fears of American domination. The invasion of Iraq is regarded as an instantiation of this fear and an implicit threat to the sovereignty of other Muslim countries.<sup>9</sup>

This report offers the following proposals in light of these findings.

### **1. American policymakers must understand that many Muslims see the United States as a potential threat to their country.**

The evidence of Gallup’s deep attitudes survey indicates that at the heart of international Muslim populations’ perceptions of the United States is a fear of American military domination and oppression. (This is not to say that all Muslims fear this, just that it is a central barrier to improving the country’s its image in the Muslim world). US policymakers must understand this.

This is not a policy prescription per se. However it is included here for one simple reason: understanding this widespread Muslim perception is a prerequisite for the success of any public diplomacy proscriptions that the United States might undertake toward the Muslim world. Understanding this will enable American policymakers to strike the right tone when doing so.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the countries were restricted to the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa

<sup>9</sup> More details about the results of the report can be found at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114007/Opinion-Briefing-Image-Middle-East-North-Africa.aspx>

The report emphasizes this point because really understanding this is, in fact, difficult for many of those involved in the United States' public affairs. The Muslims' perception of the United States as a potential invader is so wildly out of sync with how many American policymakers and political actors see their intentions that it is hard to take it seriously. But the first step toward improving the United States image among Muslims is to understand that when American political actors – whether envoys, State Department officials, or politicians – address Muslim populations, they are talking to people that often do not automatically ascribe to the United States' stated good intentions. This reality is, in large part, at the heart of the gulf between how the United States perceives itself and how it is perceived in the Muslim world.

The polarized perceptions of the war in Iraq are an example. Confirmation bias, the tendency to see facts as confirming ones' own point of view, has enabled American commentators to see this war as a confirmation of the country's benevolence in spreading democracy, whereas many Muslims see it as confirmation that their fear of American invasion is justified.

The fact that many Muslim populations regard the United States through a lens of fear is often obscured from the view of American political actors by their own good relationship with Muslim elites, whose opinions are often radically unrepresentative of those held by those they rule. Improving the country's image among Muslims is about improving its image beyond these elites.

Once policymakers understand how many Muslims see the United States, they can adjust their rhetoric accordingly in order to respect perceived American threats to their sovereignty. Sensitivity with regard to American rhetoric is a crucial first step in improving the country's image.

## **2. Gather better data about what would improve Muslim publics' perception of the United States.**

While the data we have is good as far as it goes, this report advocates a deeper, fuller academic study that would focus exclusively on what the United States would have to do to improve Muslim publics' perception of it.

The study must:

- Take place in all Muslim-majority countries, not just the Arab world.
- Contain a mixture of suggested responses (e.g., the Gallup poll referred to above) and open questions about what respondents suggest the United States could do to improve their perceptions of it in order to probe for opinions beyond what those constructing the poll expect to find.
- Ask where respondents acquire their information and news. This could greatly help the United States ensure that its messages flow through the right channels so that their reach and reception will be maximized.
- The study should seek, ultimately, to distinguish between different layers of opinion among Muslim publics. How, for example, do opinions differ between age groups, genders, classes, rural/urban populations, and various ethnic groups? This knowledge may, in time, enable more precise message targeting.

Such a poll would be a first step toward finding the common ground between the United States and international Muslim values to which President Obama alluded in his Cairo speech.

**3. The State Department must have access to public relations professionals who have worked in the Muslim world and who have an in-depth knowledge of the media environment in every Muslim country.**

This is essential if the American government's messages are to have any positive effect at all. Many of the policy proposals in this report rely on it. The "Roadmap for US Public Diplomacy" set out in February 2009 by the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs expressed the intention to "Expand the role of Regional Media Hubs, and enhance their capabilities as digital engagement centers" and to "Equip hubs with greater ability to shape regional debate in traditional media and new digital channels."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> [http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/pdfs/PD\\_US\\_World\\_Engagement.pdf](http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/pdfs/PD_US_World_Engagement.pdf), p.10

This report argues that in the Muslim world, personnel who have an in-depth knowledge of local media conditions and have worked in national media are essential.

#### **4. Public diplomacy actors should use what we know about how to improve the United States' image in the region in a more targeted way.**

For example, the Gallup poll that asked Muslims how the United States should improve its image found that in Turkey, the percentage of respondents who rated pulling out of Iraq as very significant – 30% – was equal to the percentage rating the provision of more direct humanitarian aid as very significant.

These kinds of data should be used to help the machinery of the country's public diplomacy to refine its media messages so that they will be more effective in different territories. The data in the above example demonstrate that when, for the United States provides disaster relief, both governmental and private – the recent American aid response to the disastrous flooding in Pakistan is a good example of the United States providing generous aid to a Muslim country – it should ensure that this news is covered adequately in the Turkish media. The data above is a clue for American diplomats, envoys, and informal representatives as to what different publics in different countries want to hear. Following such a policy would improve the United States' image.

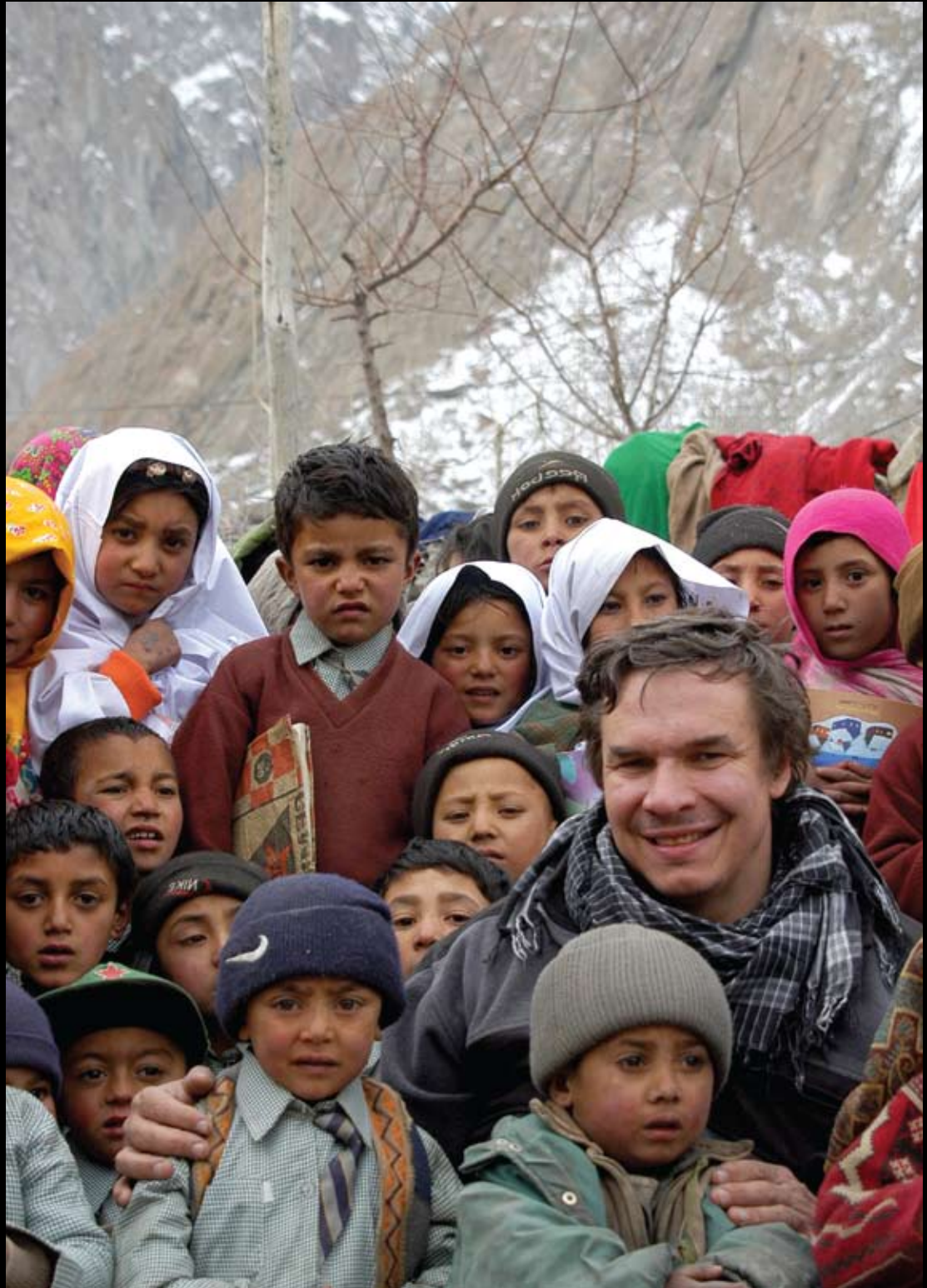
Another example: in Iran, fully 45% of respondents rated the provision of “greater technology transfer and exchange of business expertise” as most significant. They rated this as more significant to improving their perception of the United States than its withdrawal from Iraq.

Since the survey, sanctions have been put in place and so it is likely that the 45% figure has only risen. By emphasizing the Obama administration's hard work in promoting entrepreneurship via the Global Entrepreneurship Program to Iranian audiences (about which more below), the administration would begin to turn around its image in that country, undermine the negative picture the Iranian government paints of it, and thereby undermine trust in Iran's narrative.

These are just two examples of how the targeted use of data should be used to improve the United States' image in the Muslim world. Combined with better data from an improved poll, it could revitalize American public diplomacy.

*Greg Mortenson with students from schools he has helped build through his charity in Pakistan.*

*Photo courtesy of Central Asia Institute*



## Applying the Academic Principles of Public Diplomacy

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“Public Diplomacy” means engaging with international publics, as distinct from international leaders. As this report has argued, such engagement is increasingly important, as technology empowers individuals and groups to threaten the security of other nations. Conversely, improving the United States’ image with Muslim publics narrows the pool of radicalized young people from whom terrorist groups need to recruit if they are to survive.

But in thinking about how to improve the United States’ public diplomacy, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, given the existence of an active and growing academic literature on what has made public diplomacy effective in the past. At the core of this report’s methodology is the recommendation that the United States learn these lessons.

Nicholas J. Cull, professor of public diplomacy at the University of Southern California, has summarized the most important lessons of public diplomacy that history teaches us.<sup>11</sup> This section of the report considers how each lesson might be applied to the challenge of improving the United States’ image in the Muslim world.

The first principle is that public diplomacy begins with listening.

*For most governments contemplating public diplomacy, their first thought is to speak. This is a mistake. The best public diplomacy begins with listening: systematically collecting and analysing the opinion of foreign publics.<sup>12</sup>*

In the case of the Muslim world, the first priority is to try to understand why the negative shift in opinion has taken place. To his credit, President Obama has indicated that he understands this. In an interview with Al Arabiya television, he said that the most important thing for the United States to do is to “get engaged right away” and “start by listening.”<sup>13</sup> This report hopes that listening is taken on board as a priority at the State Department.

Another essential function of listening is to make sure that when the United States’ public diplomacy “speaks,” it gets what it says right, for getting it wrong risks damaging the country’s

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*“Public Diplomacy”  
is about engaging  
with international  
publics. To do this,  
the United States  
should learn from  
the mistakes and  
successes of the past.*

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Public Diplomacy: Seven lessons for its future from its past’ by Nicholas J Cull, *Place Branding And Public Diplomacy*, Vol 6, 1, 11-17

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Tuesday 27th January, 2009. Available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65096.html>

image. For example, if done sensitively cultural diplomacy can broaden understanding; if done insensitively (e.g., showing movies that contravene local mores), it risks being interpreted as cultural imperialism. Getting it right in the right place at the right time relies first on listening.

To that end, an understanding of Muslim basics is necessary. In the same way that an American audience would not take seriously a cultural envoy from, for example, Saudi Arabia who had not taken the trouble to learn the significance of the Constitution, had never heard of Orson Welles or Elvis, or even of the Mayflower, a little instruction in Islamic cultural basics can go a long way. American personnel seeking to improve the United States' image in the Muslim world should be instructed in accurate and nuanced information about Islam and Muslims. President Obama's tour of Turkey, with his offhand reference to the adhan, won a lot of points for showing care and sensitivity – at minimal cost. Such knowledge can go a long way in making a good impression.

But listening is not enough. This report argues that to improve the United States' public image in the Muslim world, listening must be combined with three further processes. First is genuinely filtering the messages you hear into the policymaking process. CENTCOM (Central Command, the command responsible for a predominantly Muslim region from the Middle East to Pakistan and Kazakhstan), provides a good example of filtering the messages into the process.

In January 2010, General Petraeus, then general commander of CENTCOM, dispatched a team to brief the joint chiefs of staff on the political messages they had heard from Arab leaders during a tour of the region the previous December. What they learned was communicated to the joint chiefs in a forty-five minute PowerPoint briefing. What made the briefing unprecedented was that it was explicitly about political, rather than military, issues. Under Petraeus, CENTCOM had decided to listen to Arab leaders. Now it was taking the bold step of feeding what it had heard back into the policymaking process.

The fact that the contents of this report came as such a shock to joint chiefs of staff chairman Admiral Michael Mullen only underlines how insulated the joint chiefs had been from opinion – even elite opinion – in the countries where American troops operated, countries with which the United States maintains essential strategic relations.



Journalist Mark Perry, who broke the story, has summed up the report's message as follows:

*The briefers reported that there was a growing perception among Arab leaders that the U.S. was incapable of standing up to Israel, that CENTCOM's mostly Arab constituency was losing faith in American promises, that Israeli intransigence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was jeopardizing U.S. standing in the region, and that (U.S. special envoy George) Mitchell himself was (as a senior Pentagon officer later bluntly described it) "too old, too slow ... and too late."*

*"Everywhere they went, the message was pretty humbling," a Pentagon officer familiar with the briefing says. "America was not only viewed as weak, but its military posture in the region was eroding."<sup>14</sup>*

This is an excellent example of departmental "listening" taking place and the relevant messages being transmitted up the chain of command. It should be the norm at the Department of Defense, not the exception. As a result, Vice President Biden was able to tell Israeli prime minister Netanyahu that Israeli actions "undermine the security of our troops who are fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. That endangers us and it endangers regional peace."<sup>15</sup> In addition, Biden informed Israel that "many people in the Muslim world perceived a connection between Israel's actions and US policy, any decision about construction that undermines Palestinian rights in East Jerusalem could have an impact on the personal safety of American troops."

Had CENTCOM not briefed the joint chiefs, the lives of American troops could have been endangered by Israeli actions without either then or Obama even being aware of that threat. It was only because of the decision to filter the messages they heard into the policymaking process that this connection came to light.

<sup>14</sup> [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/03/14/the\\_petraeus\\_briefing\\_biden\\_s\\_embarrassment\\_is\\_not\\_the\\_whole\\_story](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/03/14/the_petraeus_briefing_biden_s_embarrassment_is_not_the_whole_story)

<sup>15</sup> Reported in the Israeli newspaper 'Yediot Athronot'

*A young American Muslim girl holds the American flag.*



## POLICY PROPOSAL

- **All six Unified Combatant Commands that have regional responsibilities (of which CENTCOM is one) should undertake regular tours of their region to gauge regional opinion and report their findings to the joint chiefs of staff.**

The CENTCOM example above should become the norm. In this way, the joint chiefs and ultimately the president would not rely only on the State Department for feedback on regional opinion, but also on the military. This would build “listening” into the system and give the president a more nuanced picture of regional opinion.

- **American embassies in Muslim-majority countries must reconfigure their role to include more listening.**

American embassies have the potential to be listening hubs, feeding back a much richer and more nuanced impression of public opinion in the host country. The State Department should encourage this role by dispatching communications professionals who have had experience living in the relevant country specifically to carry out engagement projects such as public fora (the equivalent of “town hall” meetings), radio phone-in shows where they can take questions (in the native language), and other media appearances that enable them to interact with the public, where possible. They should also feed advice into the polling of Muslim publics as described above. if they notice relevant trends which they suggest feeding into a polling question.

The current obstacles to achieving this goal are rooted in the embassy staffs’ conception of their role: a “gated community” mentality toward the host country, narrowly defined roles, and very short (two-year) rotations.

But it is not enough just to listen; it is also essential to show your audience that it is being listened to. To this end, mechanisms to show that this is actually happening are essential. This is easy to achieve, for it is only a question of telling the right media in the right country at the right time that listening is taking place. For example, consider how Obama responded to the example described above. He sent George Mitchell to visit a number of Arab capitals and Admiral Mullen to meet the chief of the Israeli General Staff, Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi.

What was missed, however, was any realization of the value of the briefing itself to the Muslim street as a media story showing that the Obama administration is listening to Muslim opinion. The fact of the briefing should have been released to the media in Muslim countries. Attention should have been drawn to this event and to the connection between it and the dispatch of Mitchell and Mullen.



## POLICY PROPOSAL

- **When the United States government considers Muslim opinion, it should tell Muslim media it is doing so.**

This would make a good impression on Muslim publics. As mentioned above, it relies on the State Department's having public relations professionals who have worked in Muslim countries and who have an intimate knowledge of the media environment in each Muslim country.

When the president, joint chiefs, secretary of state or defense are briefed about opinion in a Muslim country, that briefing is itself considered a "story" that can then be offered to appropriate international Muslim media outlets. When this leads to action or policy shifts, it is even more important. By drawing attention to the internal workings of the United States government in this way, Muslim publics will start to feel that their message(s) is getting through.

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*The golden rule of public diplomacy is that what counts is not what you say but what you do...*

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A second corollary to the importance of listening is the importance of communicating what you have heard to domestic audiences. Ultimately, the shape of domestic opinion constrains policymakers. This is particularly important with regard to global Muslim opinion: Middle East peace concerns Muslims worldwide, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is a particularly strong lobbying group.

However, in a case like the example outlined above, new information – the fact that American support for Israel threatens the safety of American troops – is bound to affect the internal policymaking process. The fact that CENTCOM’s report communicated Arab opinion should be communicated to those domestic constituencies whose interests would be affected, such as AIPAC. This, in turn, would ensure that their internal decision-making process has access to the same information as that of the president. This would give policymakers’ more room for maneuver.

Professor Cull’s second principle is that “public diplomacy must be connected to policy.” In his paper, he puts it thus:

*The golden rule of public diplomacy is that what counts is not what you say but what you do... By extension, the most important link in any public diplomacy structure is that which connects “listening” to policymaking and ensures that foreign opinion is weighed in the foreign policy process.*

Edward Murrow, former United States Information Agency director to President Kennedy, laid out the case for making sure that public diplomacy was connected to policy. He urged that

*“public diplomacy officials be included when foreign policies are made for several reasons: to ensure that policymakers are aware of the likely reaction of foreign publics to a forthcoming policy; to advise how best to convincingly communicate policies to foreign audiences; and to ensure that US diplomats are prepared to articulate policies before they are announced.”*

With regard to the Muslim world, this involves taking into account Muslim sensitivities about progress toward a Palestinian state, civilian casualties as a result of drone attacks (particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan), and a perception of imbalance toward the nuclear capabilities of Israel and Iran.

There is also a lesson here about the limits of the administration's approach so far, of making good progress in areas that speak more strongly to the international Muslim public's demand for action from the United States' political class than to any particular demand for American assistance in these areas. One example is the good progress already made in fostering entrepreneurship and scientific cooperation. This is not to decry these efforts, but just to caution that even if completely successful they will not improve the United States' image if its foreign policy is still perceived as threatening. The impact they can have on public perceptions of the United States is real (but weak) as compared to engagement on those aspects of policy that elicit strong feelings around the Muslim world.

The third principle is that public diplomacy is not a performance for domestic consumption. Public diplomacy, particularly with Muslim countries, requires politicians and all representatives of the United States – whether formal or informal – to think differently about what they say and how it is perceived. In policy terms, this principle calls for diplomats, whether official or unofficial (e.g., cultural) representatives, to ensure that they have a good understanding of Muslim sensibilities before trying to engage.

Arguably, part of the reason why the Bush administration's Arabic-language TV channel Al Hura failed was that it tended to merely repackage messages of concern to American audiences, from an American domestic standpoint, and use language common to American domestic networks but alien to those beyond its shores. It simply translated those messages into Arabic and assumed that they would connect.

This may have been a way of demonstrating to the American electorate that its government was attempting to engage the Muslim world. But this should not have been one of the channel's goals in the first place. The goal of engaging Muslim populations would have been better served by a very different approach.

The fourth principle is that “effective public diplomacy requires credibility, but this has implications for the bureaucratic structure around the activity.” Professor Cull notes that this provides a significant complication for policymakers because “the ways of achieving credibility differ from one element of public diplomacy to another.” For example, government-funded media services gain credibility if there is no government interference and if they have editorial independence from the government. But envoys and foreign policy personnel, however, gain

credibility from the perception that they have the president's ear, can take messages right back to the top, and can effectively apply pressure to ensure that they are acted upon.

The policy implications of this are straightforward. If the American government makes any further attempt to set up a government-funded media organization directed toward an international Muslim audience, its credibility will come from its editorial independence from the government. But on the diplomatic side, envoys and ambassadors will derive their credibility from being trusted by and close to the president. Any future special envoys to the region must (a) be chosen from the ranks of those who have, and are seen to have, the president's ear and (b) should be tasked with engaging not just the Muslims' leaders (who in too many cases are only minimally representative of their populations), but also with reaching out to the populations themselves via local media (e.g., radio stations, local newspapers, public meetings, and public events). This non-traditional work for envoys is essential for public diplomacy.

The fifth principle is that "sometimes the most credible voice in public diplomacy is not one's own." Sometimes countries that want to make a case to other countries' leaders or populations have the sensitivity to see that its case might best be made by voices other than its own. For example, consider Britain's public diplomacy approach designed to persuade the United States to enter the Second World War on its side. Britain achieved this primarily by helping American journalists cover the war from London rather than by making a more direct appeal to the American public. Another example was the United States efforts during the 1980s to move European opinion toward allowing it to deploy intermediate nuclear forces on its territory? Rather than sending members of the Reagan administration to make the case, it allowed domestic voices within each country to do so. More recently, the author of this report has been involved in a project designed to improve the image of British Muslims within Pakistan. The "Projecting British Islam" (PBI) project has involved a visit to Pakistan by Foreign and Commonwealth officials, artists, entrepreneurs, and other figures from the British Muslim community.

The United States must learn these lessons to improve its image in the Muslim world. By enabling the most prominent American Muslim voices to engage with the populations of Muslim-majority countries, the United States could begin to loosen its reputation as a country whose Christian roots come at the expense of its tolerance and thereby promote its reputation for tolerance and diversity.



## POLICY PROPOSAL

**Eloquent Muslim Americans who can speak for that minority, particularly a cultural figure who has a following abroad, should be invited to tour Muslim countries and seek out new opportunities for cultural dialogue.**

This technique is particularly fruitful in the fight against the radicalization of young Muslims, as that process relies on convincing the initiate of the truth of a Manichean worldview that pits Islam against the United States or the West. Drawing the attention of would-be radicals toward successful, self-confident Muslim Americans undermines that picture and so narrows the pool of radicals from whom terrorists can recruit. Such open and uncensored exchanges can easily be packaged into media content for Muslim audiences overseas. In this way, the tour's impact can be magnified.

The sixth principle is that public diplomacy is not “always about you.” When thinking about how to improve a country's image, policymakers often assume, quite naturally, that they must “sell” a particular image. The problem is that as long as the United States retains negative connotations for many Muslims, such initiatives lose credibility through their association with the American government, rather than the United States gaining any credibility by associating itself with such initiatives. The solution here is to accept the idea that before the United States can “sell” its image, it needs to change it.

This particular principle is a shrewd way of changing a country's image over time. It means that rather than trying to talk to foreign publics about itself and its values, sometimes it is smarter for a country to provide a service valued by the target country, one which has no bearing on the country and its values. Professor Cull uses the example of Britain, which makes a stately home (Wilton Park) available as a conference center for the discussion of international issues, whether or not they have any bearing on Britain or British foreign policy. By doing this, Britain associates itself with international diplomacy and dispute resolution.

How should the United States apply this principle toward the Muslim world? One way would be that rather than trying to communicate with Muslim publics about the United States itself, it should proactively promote a value shared by Americans and Muslims worldwide, and one that Muslims already associate with Americans. One comes readily to mind: liberty, in particular the freedom of speech and plurality of opinion.

The United States is already strongly associated in the minds of Muslims with liberty. The deep Gallup research into international Muslim attitudes found that

*large percentages in most of the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed associate the idea of liberty with the United States more than they do other Western democracies, such as Britain, France, and Germany. For example, 68% of Iranians say citizens of the United States enjoy many liberties, compared with only 39% who say the same about Britain, 36% about France, and 24% about Germany<sup>16</sup>*

To that end, the United States should undertake a number of policy initiatives to try to foster “glasnost” in Muslim countries by, for example, opening up media spaces to allow a freer discussion of social problems. These recommendations are outlined in the next section.

The seventh principle is that “public diplomacy is everyone’s business.” In other words, public diplomacy is not just a matter for foreign policy professionals, for it is also conducted, knowingly or not, by artists, athletes, entertainers, academics, and musicians who travel to Muslim countries. Here, the United States has a strong hand to play due to the attractiveness and wealth of its culture, the fact that its cultural penetration is already deep and widespread, and because of the success and reputation of its universities and academic debate.

This report supports the proposal [here](#) for the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs to actively support American cultural diplomacy abroad. It does not, however, emphasize cultural diplomacy, for while it is valuable, it tends to do less to change minds and values than those initiatives (e.g., Radio Liberty) that speak to a broad audience about current affairs and political issues in their target countries.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.muslimwestfacts.com/mwf/105652/Muslims-Americans-Way-Forward.aspx>



## Encouraging “Glasnost” in the Muslim World

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The report by the Leadership Group on US-Muslim Engagement<sup>17</sup> urged the United States to base its policy toward supporting democratic processes in Muslim countries by “advocating for principles rather than parties in their internal leadership contests.” The authors of this report strongly agree. Advocating for a particular party undermines the United States’ role as well as the perception that it supports democratization that is free from outside interference. But if this country wants to advocate for principles, the next question is which principles should its advocacy prioritize?

The Bush administration’s advocacy of a generalized “democratization” in Muslim countries did not achieve much democratization. Part of the problem was that its rhetorical championing of democracy sat uneasily with its interest in continuing to support existing undemocratic leaders, particularly in the Middle East, as a bulwark against the bottom-up Islamist sentiment that real democracy would unleash (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). Its advocates did not understand how democracy works. They saw it as essentially about holding elections. In practice, this does not always make a significant contribution to democratization. Elections can be rigged (as in Egypt), bought (as in Afghanistan), or simply not result in a handover of power (as in Algeria). Electors can be intimidated, misinformed, not understand why they should vote, or be illiterate and therefore unable to make an intelligent choice.

Underlying all of this is a problem of culture. A democratic system presupposes a democratic culture, and this, in turn, relies on electorates holding such values as the rule of law, an understanding of the virtue of free and fair elections, the freedom of speech, and an understanding of what civil society is and why it is important. These values must be held by a critical mass before any election can meaningfully be said to represent the will of the people. So by focusing on elections over a change in cultural values, successive American administrations have been putting the cart before the horse.

But this actually provides an opportunity for American policymakers, because the freedom of speech, the plurality of opinion, civil society, and other values that are fundamental to democracy are in strong demand throughout the Muslim world. The benefits would be felt by many. This report suggests that the United States’ official rhetoric toward autocratic Muslim leaders

17 ‘Changing Course—A new direction for US Relations with the Muslim World’ at [http://www.usmuslimengagement.org/storage/usme/documents/Changing\\_Course\\_Second\\_Printing.pdf](http://www.usmuslimengagement.org/storage/usme/documents/Changing_Course_Second_Printing.pdf)

*Internally displaced Afghan children listen to radios distributed by Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty in Kabul, Afghanistan.  
Photo: Ahmad Massoud*



should move away from advocating for elections and toward placing a far greater emphasis on democracy's associated values, starting with the freedom of speech and the plurality of opinion. This would be a way of fulfilling the promise of President Obama's inaugural address that "those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent" can be sure that America "will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."<sup>18</sup>

### **The United States Should Advocate for Free Expression and the Plurality of Opinion in Muslim Countries**

The United States should consistently advocate for free expression and the plurality of opinion, thereby making it the focus of its pressure on Muslim countries. There are four reasons to focus on these two values: (a) It would improve the United States' image in the region, (b) It is a value – liberty – that Muslims already associate with the United States and that is felt strongly by both Americans and Muslims, (c) It is something the United States already has the tools and experience to do, and (d) It is a precondition for meaningful elections. By focusing on the drivers of opinion within the Muslim world, the United States would bring meaningful democratization closer to it.

One way to do this is to provide tools for greater freedom of expression and plurality of opinion. This would associate its image even closer with liberty and begin to create those conditions that are vital for the civil society upon which effective democracy depends. In addition, this could be done relatively cheaply. Thus, this report advocates that the American government improve access to radio news services and debate and advocate for digital freedoms in the Muslim world.

### **Radio Liberty**

The US already offers a radio service to countries where freedom of expression is denied: Radio Liberty. Publicly funded, Radio Liberty's mission statement states that it provides "what many people cannot get locally: uncensored news, responsible discussion, and open debate" and that it "broadcasts to 21 countries in 28 languages, including Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Russia, [and has] over 400 full-time journalists, 750 freelancers, and 20 local bureaus."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/info/about/176.html>

This station grew out of Radio Free Europe, which, in turn, was modeled on “Radio in the American Sector,” a American-sponsored radio service broadcasting in post-war Berlin that broadcast in German and was staffed almost entirely by Germans.<sup>20</sup> The station was sponsored by Congress but gained its credibility because the American government did not interfere in it (the fourth rule of public diplomacy mentioned above).

Radio Liberty has years of experience in providing a service against the will of the government within a territory. Most recently it continued to provide its Persian service despite Tehran’s attempt to block it,<sup>21</sup> normally through satellite broadcasts from outside Iran. Congress recently voted to accelerate the provision of computer hardware and software to dissident Iranians so they could evade government censors.<sup>22</sup>

Radio Liberty, which is already the most popular radio station in Afghanistan. Since it grew out of the cold war, however, it currently does not broadcast to many Muslim-majority countries. If it did, it would provide what in many countries would be the only and first-ever space for free speech and uncensored media. Democracy can only take root where a free exchange of views is permitted, and the latter can only take root if there is a free space exists in which individuals can speak their minds free of fear. Radio Liberty could provide that space.

It is a strategic interest of the United States to be seen as a contributor to the freedom of expression in the Muslim world, for this reality would cause many Muslims to once again make the link between the US and liberty. Over time, this link would break the perceived link between the United States and undemocratic regimes by allowing citizens to criticize them, damage the credibility of those radicals who want to recruit based on fallacies of American oppression, and ultimately improve the United States’ image in the Muslim world.

20 Puddington, Arch (2003) *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*. (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky)

21 <http://www.bbg.gov/pressroom/pressreleases-article.cfm?articleID=421>

22 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704875604575280962154439430.html>



## POLICY PROPOSAL

**Radio Liberty should be expanded to broadcast via satellite and online into those Muslim countries where it currently has no presence. Congress should expand its funding to that end.**

This would require an expansion of funding and a willingness to ruffle feathers, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa.

### Credibility

Broadcast content has to be credible. Getting the content of the broadcasts right is absolutely essential to the credibility of the whole initiative. Getting it wrong damages the medium's credibility and risks cementing the existing negative images of the United States. As Professor Cull's principles underline, credibility means different things in different contexts. Those funding and voting for the expansion of Radio Liberty must understand what makes for credibility within the context of broadcast radio: trustworthy information, home-grown voices being allowed to speak freely, editorial policy set with an understanding of local sensitivities and concerns, and news of local concern.

The reverse of these undermines credibility: information perceived as serving a particular interest group. This is a special danger with government-funded stations. Therefore Radio Liberty, like the BBC, must work hard to provide a free space for homegrown voices to dispel this fear; foreign voices and views predominate; the range of views is limited; editorial policy set with no understanding of local sensitivities and concerns; and news of foreign concern. The staff of Radio Liberty understand these realities. Policymakers and politicians, who do not have such an understanding, must acquire it if the United States is serious about improving its image by associating its "brand" with the freedom of speech.

### Lessons from the past: BBC vs Al Hura

The contrasting fates of the BBC's broadcasts into the Arab world and Iran and the Bush administration's attempted television channel for the Arab world (Al Hura) provide an object lesson for expanding Radio Liberty further into the Muslim world. Al Hura is widely regarded as a failure, while the BBC's foray is widely regarded as a success. This shows that editorial content, as opposed to private (non-governmental) funding, determines credibility.

Al Hura regarded its mission as making the American point of view available to Arab satellite viewers. This affected its content and editorial decisions. It soon came to be regarded in the Middle East – wrongly, but understandably – as a mouthpiece for the United States Army. On the other hand, the BBC (like Radio Liberty) regards its mission as providing Middle Eastern listeners with objective information they can trust. Thirteen million people listen to BBC Arabic every week, and [bbc.com/arabic](http://bbc.com/arabic) has over 1 million unique monthly users. Tellingly, the Iranian regime named the BBC its main enemy during its summer 2009 post-electoral crackdown, because its Persian service allowed Iranians access to a plurality of opinions. Tehran repeatedly tried to jam the BBC Persian service signal. The fact that even the regime regarded the forum thus provided as a significant threat to its hold on power showed that it feared the BBC's credibility with ordinary Iranians.

The lesson is that reaching media audiences abroad can be done only through credibility and trust, which, in turn, can only be won by providing a space for the free expression of local views. If some of these views run counter to American values, it is a price worth paying for the long-term gain in its credibility and image.



## POLICY PROPOSAL

### **Set up a working group to suggest creative ways of increasing Radio Liberty's audience in the Muslim world.**

In 2009, the international forces in Afghanistan provided some 20,000 solar-powered radios to the country's rural areas. This is an example of creative thinking deigned to increase the number of listeners for Radio Liberty. This report advocates that a working group comprising representatives from the State Department, CENTCOM, USAFRICOM, and USPACOM<sup>1</sup> be set up to suggest similar creative ways to increase Radio Liberty's audience in the Muslim world.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has already called Radio Liberty "smart power at its best." In addition, its past successes testify to its considerable know-how in this area, which could be put to use in the engagement of Muslim countries.

<sup>1</sup> United States Africa Command and United States Pacific Command

### **Self-Censorship**

One of the most insidious and subtle barriers to a free exchange of ideas which happens at a grassroots level is self-censorship, particularly by newspaper journalists and proprietors. This is commonplace, for example, in the Arab world and is likely to be a major cause for the stagnant nature of politics in many Muslim countries. The nature of self-censorship varies, as do the reasons motivating it. But everywhere that it exists, an opportunity for the vigorous debate that underpins genuine democratic choice is missed.

**SUGGESTION: American newspapers should partner with their self-censoring Muslim counterparts for joint working and mentoring.**

This is not a policy proposal per se, but rather a suggestion for a civil society project. Newspapers, both local and state, that are accustomed to airing a wide range of views and fostering extensive provocative debates (e.g., the New York Times – the more high-profile the better) could partner with newspapers in a Muslim-majority country that has a more stagnant media environment, visit, and share knowledge and experience of how to improve its diversity of opinion, solicit articles from a wide spectrum of political thinkers and actors, and pursue similar activities.

Creating such professional and personal links will have long-term advantages. For example, if presses in countries where democratic norms are less well-entrenched slip back into self-censorship, a voice beyond that paper and that society will notice. Moreover, it will be able to express its legitimate concern and communicate the harm to those who might not appreciate it. In addition, such an undertaking will establish personal links across borders so that journalists and editors will be able to ask questions about best practice procedures. These links will also make it harder for the government to make good on its threats of intimidation that underlie self-censorship.

This initiative would provide stagnant press environments with a repository of experiences of how opening up to a wider range of opinion actually benefits them commercially by making the newspaper itself a more attractive source of news. The market opportunities from a more vigorous debate and a wider representation of views should be demonstrated and communicated as a further incentive for papers to reduce self-censorship.

Official American involvement in this program should be limited to assuring the safety of its participants. Self-censorship happens because those involved fear reprisals, which could be violent. The central role of the American government in mentoring foreign-based newspapers should be restricted to ensuring that participating newspapers or websites become a safe space for the expression of dissident opinions by guaranteeing the participants' safety. American diplomats must make it clear that this is an American interest and that any intimidation of any journalists, whether American or foreign, would constitute a major diplomatic incident.



## POLICY PROPOSAL

- **The American government should set up a working group within the State Department to formulate a strategy for championing digital freedom in Muslim countries.**

It should look at such issues as how to promote access to personal computers and to the Internet in the Muslim world. Such a working group would be an essential starting point in the struggle for media pluralism in the Muslim world.

Those around the world who enjoy Internet access know that it can be a powerful space for the free exchange of ideas and expression of opinion. Unfortunately, its penetration in the Muslim world is not yet high enough to prompt government restrictions on its domestic use, as happens in China, to be the norm for illiberal states. There is evidence that this is starting to change, as can be seen in the United Arab Emirates' threats to restrict Blackberry's operations in its country. The United States should be a clear champion for digital freedom in the world.

In the past, Radio Liberty has actively provided online tools to circumvent government censorship, such as sending out a daily email to thousands of its listeners in Iran, containing "URL addresses for proxy websites (which allows Iranian Internet users to circumvent the censors). Radio Farda also broadcasts those addresses over the radio, and distributes ... software ... which provide permanent proxy links for internet users."

Its website states that

*those tools became critical [in the summer of 2009] when, in the wake of Iran's disputed election, proxy sites – many of them fed by RFE/RL – kept Iranians connected to websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Traffic from RFE/RL's client software spiked, and the organization rushed to manage the increase. Since then, Iranians have used up so much of RFE/RL's bandwidth that the organization has been forced to limit its proxy access to several critical news sources and social media outlets. RFE/RL – together with human rights NGOs and Iranian activists in the diaspora – has been a central figure in the fight for free information in Iran.*



## Conclusion

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In coming decades, the United States' national security is likely to stem from threats located within foreign populations more than ever before. Public diplomacy, defined as the actual engagement with individual or groups within those populations, is increasingly an imperative of national security, rather than just a younger sibling to the traditional elite-to-elite diplomacy. Policy in this area must be conducted based on evidence related to Muslim opinion in particular and, more generally, about what has (and has not) worked in the past. The United States must avoid repeating the mistakes of previous generations and learn from their successes. The Obama administration had made some progress in turning the country's image around in the Muslim world; however, these gains are beginning to disappear. Clearly, the next few years are crucial.

The administration has made a good start with its initiatives to promote cooperation in science and entrepreneurship. But it now needs to move beyond these areas so that it can work in those areas that Muslims themselves say are more important to them and would improve their perception of the United States.

We must gather better data about what would improve Muslim publics' perception of the United States, hire public relations professionals who have worked in the Muslim world and understand its media environment, target our message more precisely to where there is evidence that it will be well received, and show Muslims that we are listening to them.

The military must institutionalize its listening tours in the areas where it operates and provide an alternative line of communication to the Joint Chief of Staff and the White House. Envoys must be tasked with engaging Muslim publics, not just unrepresentative Muslim elites, and Muslim Americans must be encouraged to dilute the dangerous Manichaeian perception of American society.

In Radio Liberty, the country has built up an institution with decades of know-how on how to provide a trustworthy space for local news and debate. It should be expanded to better engage Muslim publics via satellite and online. In addition, the United States must be explicit about advocating for digital freedoms in Muslim countries and be willing to back up its rhetoric with diplomatic consequences for those countries that try to stifle the freedom of expression online.



These changes will not change Muslim opinion of the United States on their own. That can only be done by recasting American foreign policy. Within this constraint, however, these suggestions can make a significant contribution. First, contrary to the beliefs of a former era, American military intervention alone cannot turn Muslim countries into democracies; however, it can be there to help as they follow their own path toward democratization by encouraging “glasnost.” Second, one of the biggest strategic opportunities for the United States in the Muslim world is the fact that both the Muslim and American populations share the value of the freedom of speech. It is, in a sense, the common ground to which Barack Obama alluded in his Cairo speech. In the coming years, the United States can use this strategic advantage to improve its image in the Muslim world.

### Policy Suggestions

1. American policymakers must understand that many Muslims see the United States as a potential threat.
2. Gather better data about what would improve Muslim publics’ perception of the United States.
3. The State Department must have access to public relations professionals who have worked in the Muslim world and have an in-depth knowledge of the local media environment.
4. Public diplomats should use what we know about how to improve the United States’ image in the region in a more targeted way.
5. All six Unified Combatant Commands that have regional responsibilities, of which CENTCOM is one, should undertake regular regional tours to gauge regional opinion and report their findings to the joint chiefs of staff.
6. American embassies in Muslim-majority countries must reconfigure their role to include more listening.

7. When the American government considers Muslim opinion, it should inform Muslim media outlets that it is doing so.
8. Any future special envoys to the region must be chosen from the ranks of those who have, and are seen to have, the president's ear.
9. Any future special envoys to the region should be tasked with engaging both Muslim leaders (who in too many cases are only minimally representative of the populations they rule) and with reaching out to the populations themselves.
10. Eloquent Muslim Americans who can speak for that minority, particularly if he or she is a cultural figure who has a following abroad, should be invited to tour Muslim countries and seek out new opportunities for cultural dialogue.
11. Radio Liberty should be expanded to broadcast via satellite and online into those Muslim countries in which it currently has no presence. Congress should expand its funding to that end.
12. Set up a working group to suggest creative ways of increasing Radio Liberty's audience in the Muslim world.
13. The American government should set up a working group within the State Department to formulate a strategy for championing digital freedom in Muslim countries.



## Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

**T**he Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is an independent nonprofit think tank committed to education, research, and analysis of U.S. domestic and foreign policies issues, with an emphasis on topics related to the American Muslim community.

Since its inception in 2002, ISPU has built a solid reputation as an organization committed to objective, empirical research and continues to be a valuable source of information for policy makers, scholars, journalists and the general public. Our research aims to increase understanding of Muslims in the United States while also tackling the many policy issues facing all Americans. We provide cuttingedge analysis and policy recommendations through publications, conferences, government briefings and media commentary. ISPU firmly believes that optimal analysis and treatment of social issues mandates a comprehensive study from several different and diverse backgrounds. As social challenges become more complex and interwoven, ISPU is unique in its ability to bring this new approach to the human and social problems facing our country. Our multidisciplinary approach, in partnership with universities, think tanks and other research organizations, serves to build understanding and effect lasting social change.

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