

**“ENGAGING WITH MUSLIM COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD”
HEARING BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
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OPENING STATEMENT BY SENATOR KERRY

As the President made clear in his speech on Tuesday night, America has started a new chapter in our history. Part of this must be a new chapter in our relations with the Muslim world.

I’ve just returned from a trip to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza. At every turn, I heard a newfound willingness by people and governments alike to take a fresh look at America. This moment won’t last long, and we need to seize it.

Let me acknowledge up front that even speaking of a single “Muslim world” is a misnomer: we must recognize the spectacular diversity of a religion that encompasses a fifth of humanity, many Sunni and Shia denominations, democracies and dictatorships, hundreds of languages, and uncountable thousands of tribes and ethnic groups. Most Muslims live far outside the Middle East, from the fishing villages of Senegal to rice-paddies of Java, from the suburbs of Paris to the streets of Dearborn, Michigan.

For all these differences, today we must send a simple message to all Muslims: we share your aspirations for freedom, dignity, justice, and security. We’re ready to listen, to learn, and to honor the President’s commitment to approach the Muslim world with a spirit of mutual respect.

We have a great deal of work to do. An alarming number of Muslims today believe that our goal is not to end terrorism but to dominate or diminish Islam itself. And their mistrust is reciprocated by many westerners who now wonder whether the gaps between us are unbridgeable, whether higher walls or fewer visas can substitute for difficult task of coexistence.

These perceptions are harmful to America. Each undercuts our efforts in what I see as the larger struggle—not a cooked-up “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West—but a struggle within Islam between the overwhelming majority who share our basic values and a small sliver who seek to pervert the *Quran* to justify bloodshed or move their societies backward.

Nobody thinks that national security policy should be a popularity contest—but what should be equally clear is that our legitimacy matters. Not only do we need it to dissuade those vulnerable to an extremist message from taking up arms against us—we also need the active support and cooperation of their governments and communities.

Part of restoring trust will be broadening relations with Muslim nations beyond the few lightning-rod topics that have defined them since 9/11 to include combating poverty, climate change, investing in human development and creating knowledge societies. Among our most effective steps to counteract extremism was providing the humanitarian aid to Pakistan and Indonesia in the wake of natural disasters: what mattered wasn’t merely the assistance, it was the sight of American troops actively working to save Muslim lives.

At the same time, unless we take a different approach to addressing them, a handful of symbolically-charged issues have the potential to poison the well and reduce all our efforts to nonstarters or afterthoughts in the minds of those we seek to influence.

That is one reason why I am so pleased that the President reiterated his commitment on Tuesday night, that “without exception or equivocation the United States of America does not torture.” No PR effort can erase the sting of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. And while strong words are helpful, the world will ultimately judge us by our actions.

Restoring our moral authority also inescapably demands that America return to our traditional role as an honest and firm broker in the Middle East peace process. In Gaza, I visited a village called Izbet Abed Rabbo, and I saw little Palestinian girls playing in rubble where, three months ago, buildings stood. It was searing. I said publicly in Gaza, as I’d said in the southern Israeli town of Sderot earlier that day, if Quincy were lobbing rockets into Boston, I’d have to put a stop to it. But the reality is that people on both sides deserve better—and we know what it’s going to take to get them there: two states side by side in peace and security.

I don’t want to delve too deeply into Israel-Palestine in this forum, but suffice it to say that without a demonstrated commitment to peacemaking as an honest broker, this will remain a millstone around any effort to reach out to Muslims anywhere. And as we work to empower partners from Morocco to northwest Pakistan, we can’t afford policies that make it unsustainable for locals to be seen as pro-American. We can’t afford to be politically radioactive.

If we truly want to empower Muslim moderates, we must also stop tolerating the casual Islamophobia that has seeped into our political discourse since 9/11. As we gather here today, a Senate colleague of mine is reportedly hosting a screening—in the Capitol building itself—of a short film called “Fitna” that defames a faith practiced by 1.3 billion people. The movie’s director has not only compared the *Quran* to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*—this director, a supposed champion of free speech has suggested that his own Dutch government ban the *Quran* outright. So I’m glad you’re here, rather than there.

Let me also take a moment to recognize the important role of America’s Muslim communities: your patriotism is a source of security for all of us, and your freedom to worship is a powerful counterargument against those who say our values are incompatible with Islam.

In some ways, our task should be easy: most Muslims are far closer to Americans in their love of life, family, freedom, and prosperity than they are to the core values of Al Qaeda. The data show that the more Muslims know about Al Qaeda, the less they like Al Qaeda. We should build on these trends by seeking out and restoring the partnerships in education, science, technology, arts and culture which for decades sustained good US-Muslim relations. We should expand educational exchanges and seriously invest in foreign language capabilities. We also need smart public diplomacy that is embedded in our political and military decision-making.

It is also encouraging that both sides increasingly see the need to deepen and improve our dialogue. From the “Common Word” letter from Islamic religious leaders, to King Abdullah’s interfaith conference in Madrid, to President Obama’s appearance on *al-Arabiya*, to the US-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar which our first two panelists recently attended.

We're honored to have with us today former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who has been a leader on these issues through the US-Muslim Engagement Project. Adm. William Fallon, former CENTCOM and PACOM chief, has unique insights into how our military actions and political goals can suffer without the active cooperation of local communities.

On our second panel, we will hear from three experts who can help us better understand how to move forward in effectively engaging with the broader Muslim world. Dalia Mogahed is the coauthor of *Who Speaks for Islam?* and leads Gallup's opinion survey of over one billion Muslims worldwide. Dr. Eboo Patel is the founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, now active on some 50 American campuses. He focuses on cultivating religious pluralism amongst young people and was recently appointed to the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Zeyno Baran is an expert on Eurasia and currently sits at the Hudson Institute. She will offer her perspective on the spread of radical ideology in Europe.

I want to welcome all of you and thank you for lending your expertise to this crucial topic at what we hope will be remembered as a pivotal moment in our relations with the Muslim world.