

Engaging with Muslim Communities around the World

**Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
February 26, 2009**

**Zeyno Baran
Senior Fellow, Center on Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World
Hudson Institute**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Lugar, Members of the Committee:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you my ideas about how to engage more effectively with the many and varied Muslim communities around the world. There are huge expectations that the Obama administration will undo some of the damage to the perception—and influence—of the United States within Muslim societies that has accrued during the past decade. I hope my brief presentation will contribute to this effort.

I will begin by describing the biggest challenge facing the US today: the problem of “us” and “them.” While it is clear to us, in Washington at least, that our foreign and security policies are *not* directed against Islam or any other religious community, it is not so readily understandable to many Muslims who see themselves as being part of “them.” In order to engage more effectively, our first step is to develop an accurate understanding of just who “we” and “them” are—otherwise the US may continue to alienate Muslims and strengthen the Islamists. I will then suggest some “do’s and don’ts” that should guide US policy going forward, before in closing emphasizing two priorities that the President and his administration should adopt: liberal democracy and the empowerment of women.

Engagement: With whom and for what purpose?

I believe the biggest challenge in outreach programs has been the inability to identify what it is that America wants from Muslims; in other words, what is the purpose of engagement? Is it merely to stop terror attacks against Americans and allies? Is it to learn about a religion and its many cultural, political and historical aspects? Is it to genuinely try to improve the lives of Muslims, whether they live in Pakistan, Malaysia, Somalia or North America? I would argue that we will see an end to terror, radicalism and extremism when our intention becomes the empowerment of Muslims so they can achieve their full human potential.

However, for a long time we have been trapped in a “war on terror” mindset, thereby neglecting the fact that terror is merely a tool used as part of a bigger strategy. This strategy encourages

division, separating the “West” from “the rest,” so that those in the latter category will be left with no choice but to support Islamist political ideology. I have written extensively about the difference between Islam (the religion) and Islamism (the political ideology) and how we need to expose the extremists' cynical exploitation of the religion as a means of convincing the moderate majority of their fellow Muslims that the current conflict is *religious* in nature—and that the only solution is for Muslims to come together as part of a single nation (umma) following its own legal system (sharia) in pursuit of a new and anti-democratic world order.

Why is Islamism a threat to democracy? Because according to its interpretations, sharia regulates every aspect of an individual’s life; moreover, since it is considered to be God’s law, no compromises are possible. The holistic nature of Islamist ideology makes it fundamentally incompatible with the self-criticism and exercise of free will necessary for human beings to form truly liberal and democratic societies.

The Islamist movement is much stronger today than it was in 2001. And it will continue to get stronger over the next decade unless we realize we are faced with a long-term social transformation project designed to make Muslims angry and fearful people who can then be easily controlled.

Despite our denials, this destructive ideology is increasingly taking hold in America as well. Consider Islamization like smoking: one cigarette may not cause that much harm, but continued smoking will do terrible damage to one’s health. Some people die from it.

Just recently we were shocked about a beheading of a woman by her husband who, reportedly, cited sharia as grounds for denying her a divorce. FBI Director Robert Mueller recently talked about the first known US citizen to participate in a suicide bombing in Somalia; he said, “The prospect of young men, indoctrinated and radicalized within their own communities and induced to travel to Somalia to take up arms—and to kill themselves and perhaps many others—is a perversion of the immigrant story,” he said. “For these parents to leave a war-torn country only to find their children have been convinced to return to that way of life is heartbreaking.” He is right.

A Different Transformation

Death and destruction leads to further death and destruction; we need to rebuild—above all people’s imagination, and thereby freeing their creative powers to live with joy and passion.

So what should the US do?

Let's start with what not to do:

- Don't reduce Muslims to people whose main identity is their religious affiliation; they have hopes, frustrations, aspirations just like anyone else.
- Don't expect the silent majority to speak up until and unless they see a clear sign that the US has decided to win, which means empowering the true democrats and ending existing unholy alliances.
- In choosing partners to engage, listen to what they say and look at what do when they are with their own people, not what they say to you in private meetings, behind closed doors.
- Don't assume an individual or group that *sounds* moderate in fact *is* moderate
- Don't look for "spokesmen" or "representatives" for Muslims as the solution. Most of these people just speak for themselves or their organizations.

Moreover, Islam teaches Muslims that we are our own masters; we submit only to God, and no religious authority on earth can control our hearts and minds—unless we let them.

It is therefore critically important to shine a light on what is truly going on under the so-called Islamic regimes—so Muslims can see for themselves that life under a sharia-based legal system is not, in fact, better than under liberal democracy. When asked why they want sharia, most people explain that they want an end to crime and corruption and want to live with safety, security and dignity; most believe it is possible to take only "good aspects" of sharia, and leave out "bad aspects". Maybe one day this will be possible, but today, the implementers of sharia do not allow such choices. Because, as I mentioned earlier, since it is considered to be God's law, no compromises are possible.

You don't need to believe me, but please also don't believe the men whose lives are not as affected as women, and please don't also believe the women who have never lived under the sharia system. Just ask the women who have lived or still do live under a sharia system—ask them if their lives have improved. And ask them if they want their daughters to live under this system as well.

Unfortunately media, especially those sources that cater to Muslim audiences, hardly ever show things such as images of Muslims being killed by other Muslims, imams preaching hatred or mothers celebrating their son's suicide bombing success, or teachers indoctrinating young brains with hatred towards the Jews and Christians and anyone they consider "the other". These are not seen or heard by the members of the silent majority, which is kept ignorant and in denial—the only time they see heartbreaking images of women and children dying is when it is non-Muslims, especially Americans, killing them. Most people have no idea what is going on in places like Darfur or even in the middle of a European capital. Unless people have the

information and analyze it for themselves, they will never say “enough” to the abuse of their faith—or stop hating America.

For this purpose providing alternative media sources is critically important. The US can best help by increasing funding and coverage of both the Voice of America as well as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and find other ways to help enlighten people so they can see and hear the truth for themselves.

In this context, I believe there are two fundamental priorities the Obama administration ought to adopt, if this time things are to be different: a commitment to liberal democracy and to the empowerment of women.

Commitment to Liberal Democracy

Throughout the world, liberal democracy is once again being challenged both as a political system and, more fundamentally, as an ideology and as a set of beliefs. Whether we like it or not, we are engaged in an ideological struggle—and the US is losing ground. Further spread of Islamism will leave America isolated and powerless to achieve its goals in security and foreign policy.

Faced with authoritarian threats in both religious and secular forms, the US should not be questioning *whether* to promote democracy; but should be deciding *how*. A democracy promotion effort needs to be not piecemeal, but comprehensive; a holistic challenge requires a holistic response. The whole concept needs to be redesigned with an eye towards constructing a longer-term timeframe that lasts beyond any one presidential administration. If not, the US and its allies will continue to grow weaker as its opponents strengthen.

In general, the US looks for short-term successes when instead a generational commitment is needed—as the Bush administration originally stated. But again, the US had to demonstrate success quickly, and thus went for the “low-hanging fruit”—at points even sounding as doctrinaire about democracy promotion as those who oppose democracy. Now, as a result, we are back at the same point in the cycle—if not lower.

Despite over 60 years of on-again, off-again efforts at democracy promotion in the Middle East and places like Afghanistan and Pakistan, the binary model that forces a choice between autocrats in power and populist extremists out of power has never really disappeared. It is a mystery to me why the US does not remain true to its own values and support the third option—the liberal democrats. Yes, liberal democrats in most parts of the so-called Muslim world are but a small minority today—but they will never grow in support unless backed by the US; the other two sides already get all the financial and organizational help they could want.

The prevailing view—that Islamists should be co-opted into existing political systems—simply will not work. Often, Islamists are willing to make superficial concessions while continuing to hold an uncompromising worldview. The US simply does not understand Islamism, even though it has been an active and increasingly powerful counter-ideology over at least three decades. Islamism is not compatible with democracy; Muslims can be democrats. There is a huge difference.

The academics, analysts and policy makers who argue that a movement like the Muslim Brotherhood today is “moderate” seem to disregard its ideology, history, and long-term strategy. They even seem to disregard the Brotherhood’s own statements. It is true that most affiliates of this movement do not directly call for terrorist acts, are open to dialogue with the West, and participate in democratic elections. Yet this is not sufficient for them to qualify as “moderate,” especially when their ideology is so extreme. Turning a blind eye to ideological extremism—even if done for the sake of combating violent extremism and terrorism—is a direct threat to the democratic order.

Unfortunately, since 9/11, the US has alienated many of its allies and strengthened enemies in the Muslim world. This is one of the reasons why the US lost the support of the secular movement within Turkey, which is traditionally the domestic constituency most closely allied to the West. Turkey is the only NATO member with a majority Muslim population. Today, a large majority of Turks have negative views of the US, and these include people who are American educated. Why is that? Because they (correctly) perceive US policy as promoting a “moderate Islamist” government in their country—one that can serve as a model for the Muslim world. Yet even the current political leadership coming from an Islamist past opposes to be called “moderate Islamist” and instead prefers “Muslim democrat” as a description.

Turkey is truly unique for a country with nearly all Muslim citizens; the US needs to first understand what makes it unique before trying to change it so it fits a particular democratization theory. The end of the caliphate and the Islamic sharia legal system were revolutionary moves. Most Muslim countries still have sharia law enshrined in their constitutions, something which has impeded their democratic evolution. For its part, Turkey has evolved as a democratic country because it was founded as a *secular* republic. It is in this context the country has served as a beacon of hope for liberal democrats across the Muslim world.

Going forward

It is critically important to recognize that since 9/11, anti-American movements, groups and leaders (from Russia to Venezuela) have come closer together in a shared hostility to the Western liberal system. The worldwide US commitment to, and promotion of, liberal democracy must therefore not be tacked on as an afterthought, but must be at the core of the US foreign and

national security strategy. This means returning to the fundamentals of what America is about: defending and guaranteeing freedom and dignity.

Yet, it is important to keep in mind that anti-American groups will continue to try to take advantage of open societies. Some intentionally provoke incidents intended to promote an “us versus them” mentality. They also feed conspiracy theories. The Islamist narrative is about victimization and humiliation; it is part of a deadly mixture of the feeling of political and economic inferiority with moral and ethical superiority.

I believe having President Obama in office will grant the US only short-term relief; Islamists are working on new narratives and searching for new grievances, since their need to undermine the US and its democratic vision is so incredibly strong. Hopefully, the Obama administration will not be so eager to reverse the unpopularity of the Bush years that it will limit the emphasis on democracy that is so essential for advancing American interests.

America needs to be true to its values and principles. The US should not be promoting “moderate Islam,” but liberal democracy. There is no Arab or Muslim exceptionalism; leaders make these arguments in order to retain their hold on power over their people. Even though people in different parts of the world may use different terms, the yearning for what we call freedom and liberal democracy is indeed universal.

There are no easy solutions, but if the US does not show leadership, no one else will. We need to be patient and focus on institution-building to enable democratic cultures to take hold. Each country has its own path that is based on its own history, culture and traditions, and it takes time; there simply is no shortcut. The US seems to have a lot of patience with the “democratization” process in Saudi Arabia—so why is there a different approach to Egypt?

We need to make a long-term commitment and not look for short-term successes that jeopardize longer-term gains. It should be clear by now that democracy is not merely about the electoral process. Holding elections, however free and fair in a technical sense, without first undertaking the difficult process of building institutions will get us only one thing: Hamas. Simply put, hungry, fearful, and uneducated people cannot be democrats. They need to be safe from being killed purely because they are from the wrong ethnic, religious or sectarian background. People also need to be educated—illiteracy is a problem in itself, but what is taught is as important. If all they are taught is how to memorize the Koran or why to hate the West, how can they transcend this teaching? And without building critical-thinking skills as well as teaching civics and democratic values, we will continue to see highly intelligent Western-educated doctors and engineers committing suicide attacks. People also need to be able to feed and clothe their families; but material successes are not enough to imbue one with a love for the liberal democratic system that makes them possible.

Clearly, the US cannot do this cheaply—especially given how much everyone else is spending on anti-democratic agendas. In many of these programs, there can be partnerships with the Europeans and others who are similarly committed to democratic development. Moreover, compared to how much US is spending on wars and military budget, the amount will be minimal with huge returns. And, with the economic crisis hitting parts of the world that are so critical, such as Pakistan, there is even greater need for the US to allocate larger sums of money for education and institution building by supporting organizations that would eventually lead to democratic civil society—particularly secular organizations (press, judiciary, women’s organizations, small and medium business associations, etc).

In many parts of the world, following the shock of globalization and the resulting questioning of identities, countries are reconstructing their own national identities. The US has to be influencing this process so destructive ideas do not take root.

Empowerment of Women

This is especially important when it comes to the most critical Muslim partners, the women. It is also why of all the various segments of Muslim communities, women have to be the primary focus of engagement. This is not just feminist theory; women are *already* the focus of Islamists who have correctly identified them as their most important starting point of their social engineering project: Women are the nucleus of family and society; mothers raise the next generation---a woman kept ignorant and living in fear can easily be controlled. If we neglect the women, we neglect the next generation. So if the US wants to see a different kind of social transformation, then women have to be at the center of all programs and not filed away under “women’s issues”.

To start with, there is no excuse or justification for beating or otherwise violating a woman—and when it happens, the appropriate punishment must follow. At the same time, women need to be given help; and the existence of places that help them, including shelters, needs to be widely publicized. Rape needs to be punished severely since it is a form of murder—one which kills the spirit—and which is used systematically as a weapon of war against civilian populations.

In addition to the basic safety and security, women need to be empowered to know their own value while being provided with the tools to defend and protect themselves. Most importantly, their imagination needs to be kept alive, and here culture, arts, and literature are essential tools—and that is also why these are the first areas targeted by the Islamists. Anything that will keep the imagination alive so they can dream of a different life is banned by the Taliban and the like.

It is also often limited and controlled by the secular authoritarian leaders—after all, the Islamists and the secular authoritarians are the two sides of the same coin: both want to control the hearts and minds. We need to free the minds and fill the hearts with love, not hatred; only then will the anti-Americanism subside.

Like everyone else, Muslim women need to read or be told about uplifting and truly empowering stories—from their own cultures. I mean *truly* empowering because I have in mind the story of an Iraqi woman who was part of a plot in which young women were raped and then sent to her for matronly advice, only to be told that becoming suicide bombers was their only escape from the shame and to reclaim their honor. This shows how far the destructive powers will go.

Instead, we need role models like Scheherazade, and learn from her stories that span a thousand and one nights. Her tale is one of the most beautiful ones with many different lessons for many of us—yet is unavailable in most parts of the world where Muslims live; it is often banned, when books that preach hatred as distributed freely. It is a story about a king who would marry and then kill his wives after their first night because he would fear they would betray him. Scheherazade, however, survived thanks to her wit and imagination: she began telling a tale that continued for 1001 nights, and in this process she gradually opened the king's heart and soul to love—in the end he spared her. In many ways she spared him too by awakening humanity that allowed him to love again.

This is the kind of story we need be told by mothers to their daughters. This is the kind of story men need to hear as boys so they do not become hardened radicals. They need not fear women or keep them oppressed and ignorant: if Scheherazade did not have the right tools to capture his imagination, she would have been killed like many others before her, and the king and the kingdom would have continued to suffer. She saved them all; by spreading stories like hers, we can help save other women and men, the rulers and the rules, and ultimately ourselves.