

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for Hearing on
Engaging with Muslim Communities
February 26, 2009

I thank Senator Kerry for holding this hearing on engagement with Muslim communities. I join him in welcoming Secretary Albright, Admiral Fallon and our other distinguished witnesses.

In 2006, the Foreign Relations Committee held two hearings closely related to this topic. We heard from Administration counterterrorism and intelligence officials, scholars, and authors on how we could improve engagement with the Muslim world. We also examined how we could best respond to radicalization that induces individuals to become terrorists and creates support for terrorist organizations among Muslim populations.

This hearing continues that oversight and provides a chance to explore new opportunities that have been created by the global interest in President Obama.

A poll released yesterday by World Public Opinion.org demonstrates the complexities of this issue. The report found that strong majorities in several focus Muslim countries disapproved of terrorist attacks on American civilians. But a majority of respondents simultaneously endorsed al Qaeda's goal of forcing the United States out of Middle East military bases. Moreover, large majorities in several Muslim countries expressed approval of attacks on U.S. troops stationed on Muslim soil.

President Obama's actions in the first weeks of his Presidency indicate that he is determined to provide leadership in reaching out to Muslims. Through his interview with an Arab television network and his appointment of George Mitchell as a special envoy to the Middle East, he has attempted to strike a more positive tone. These steps have created some momentum toward productive engagement.

But President Obama's popularity alone will not guarantee success in the absence of a consistent and compelling American narrative that is closely synchronized with our policies. This narrative must be embraced and implemented throughout our government. It must be echoed by diplomats, development experts, contractors, and military professionals alike. We must continue to support exchanges that bring people from other nations into contact with talented Americans capable of explaining and representing our country. We also must improve recruitment of Muslim Americans and those who have expertise in Muslim cultures into diplomatic and military service.

A lynchpin in the leadership chain and the primary manager of outreach programs to the Muslim world has been the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy. Since this post was created in 1999, some very talented people have occupied it. Unfortunately, no one has occupied it for very long. During the last ten years, the post has been vacant more than a third of the time and the longest tenure of any Undersecretary was a little more than two years. This circumstance has severely hampered attempts to implement a public diplomacy strategy, and it has contributed to others in our government inventing their own narratives. President Obama and Secretary Clinton must remedy this shortcoming by ensuring continuity in focus and message during their tenure.

This Committee stands ready to support the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy. We want the Undersecretary to have the power, the funding, and the political backing required to do the job. Funds for public diplomacy will have to be spent efficiently and creatively if we are to explain the

views of the United States, display the humanity and generosity of our citizens, and expand opportunities for interaction between Americans and foreign peoples.

Our rivals in the marketplace of ideas are playing hardball. Al Qaeda has an astonishing web presence, including such features as multiple-angle videos of suicide bombings. The Iranian government not only materially backs Hamas and Hezbollah, it maintains an outreach program in 47 predominantly Muslim African and Asian countries. Among other means, this program employs Iranian Cultural Centers that offer Persian language classes and extensive library resources.

This is one of the reasons why I recently introduced Senate Resolution 49, calling for a reassessment of whether we could safely re-establish “American Centers” in major foreign cities. These Centers offer libraries, outreach programs, unfiltered internet access, film series, lectures and English classes that enable foreigners to meet and interact with Americans of all walks of life. In past decades American Centers attracted young people as well as community leaders, journalists and policy experts. But with the end of the Cold War and the onset of more acute terrorism concerns, most American Centers were either phased out or downsized and moved behind protective embassy walls. After taking into account security considerations, we should determine whether American Centers can be re-established in some key locations.

Despite challenges, the United States has advantages that can be brought to bear on the problem. Our country is still admired for its democracy and freedom of political expression. Our disaster relief efforts in Pakistan and Indonesia in recent years produced measurable improvements in public attitudes toward the United States. And there is broad recognition in many Muslim countries of the importance of the United States in addressing global challenges like climate change, hunger, and technology development.

I look forward to hearing the perspectives of our witnesses on how the United States can construct a coherent program of engagement that builds on our nation’s strengths and takes advantage of the opening created by the new Administration.

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