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Engaging With Muslim Communities Around the World

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Mr. Chairman, ranking member Lugar: Thank you for inviting me to share findings from Gallup's ongoing research on Muslims around the world, and what our analysis suggests is the best way forward in reversing the apparent downward spiral in the relationship between the United States and these diverse communities. This is a complicated issue, and given the time constraints of this hearing, my remarks will necessarily sound general. I apologize for this, but I would like to just outline the framework for tackling this challenge. These ideas are more fully developed in my book,¹ along with a new report on Muslim Americans to be released Monday, which we'll make sure all of you receive².

Many claim to speak for Muslims, and therefore an accurate representative understanding of this *silenced* majority from their own perspective is a critical first step to building effective strategies to improve relations. My remarks this afternoon reflect extensive Gallup research on global Muslim attitudes. Ongoing since 2001, Gallup has conducted tens of thousands of hour-long, face-to-face interviews with residents of more than 40 nations with majority or substantial minority Muslim populations. The sample represents residents young and old, educated and illiterate, female and male, and from urban and rural settings. In totality, we surveyed a sample representing more than 90% of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims, making this the largest, most comprehensive study of contemporary Muslims ever done.

Our research uncovered a number of surprising insights, but the most important was this: A massive conflict between the U.S. and Muslims around the world is not inevitable. Our differences are driven by politics — not a clash of principles. Our research suggests three primary filters shape Muslims' negative views of the U.S.: Perceptions of 1. disrespect; 2. political domination; 3. acute conflicts. To improve relations and further decrease the appeal of violent extremism, we must turn to what I will call the 3 R's: **Resolution** of conflicts, and **Reform** and **Respect**, rather than looking to religious explanations for Muslim behavior.

¹ *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* by John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed (Gallup Press, 2008)

² "Muslim Americans: A National Portrait," Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, March 2009

Common Ground

Contrary to popular media images, residents of Muslim majority countries around the world share a great deal in common with most Americans. This common ground includes an admiration of democratic values and good governance, valuing faith and family, and an overwhelming public rejection of violent extremism. Ordinary people around the world also agree that greater interaction between Muslim and Western communities is more a benefit than a threat, including more than 70% of Americans. Majorities worldwide, from Boston to Baghdad, also say better relations between these communities is of personal importance.

Our findings suggest anti-American sentiment is not borne out of a religiously inspired hatred of Western culture. For example, though anti-American sentiment is rampant in many Muslim majority countries, especially in the Middle East, it is not shared by Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, it is not exclusive to Muslims. Less than 10% of the general public in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Germany, and Spain approved of U.S. leadership in 2008, whereas strong majorities — more than 70% of Muslims in Mali and Sierra Leone expressed approval. Moreover, even those Muslims who view the U.S. and the U.K. negatively have a neutral to positive view of France and Germany — in fact, as positively as they view other Muslim majority countries. These results suggest Muslims' views of countries fall along policy and not cultural or religious lines.

Despite widespread disapproval of U.S. leadership, Muslims worldwide said they in fact admired much of what the West holds dear. When asked to describe what they admired most about the West in an open-ended question, the most frequent response was technology, expertise, and knowledge; the second most frequent response was freedom and democracy. Moreover, when Americans were asked the same question, the top two responses were identical. Majorities, including more than 80% of Egyptians, say that moving toward greater democracy will help Muslims progress. Contrary to what might be assumed in light of the Danish cartoon crisis, Muslims around the world, in majorities greater than 90% in Egypt, Indonesia, and Iran said they would include free speech as a fundamental guarantee if they were to draft a new constitution for a new country.

However, while acknowledging and admiring political freedom in the West, Muslim communities did not favor a wholesale adoption of European models. Very few associated 'adopting western values' with Muslim political and economic progress. Our data suggest that while admiring fair elections in the West, many Muslims envision a democratic model of their own. We found the majority in virtually every country surveyed believed Sharia should be at least *a source* of legislation.

At the same time, a vast majority of those surveyed, in addition to their admiration for political freedom in the West, also said they support freedoms of speech, religion, and assembly — as well as a woman's right to vote, drive, work outside the home, and lead. In addition, a mean of 60% say they would want religious leaders to play no direct role in drafting a country's constitution (and even among those who take the contrary view, most would want clerics limited to an advisory function). So while Muslim support for Sharia is high, so is their support for democratic and egalitarian values, including

women's rights and freedom of speech. At the same time, majorities do not want a 'theocracy' or a government run by presumably infallible theocrats.

Counter intuitively, our analysis suggests Sharia is viewed as representing 'rule of law' — a set of rules and rights that no dictator is above because they are God given — unalienable rights endowed by the Creator. For example, a near unanimous 96% of Egyptian women associate Sharia compliance with protecting human rights. Government's role, therefore, should be to protect those rights. Thus, complete secularism can mean for many the lifting of all constraints in preventing government-sponsored tyranny — in fact taking away people's God-given rights.

Aspirations were also common. When respondents in Muslim communities around the world were asked to describe their dreams for the future, we didn't hear about waging war against the West, but instead we heard getting better work and offering a better future to their children. This response was heard among 70% of Indonesians and 54% of Iranians. A recent Gallup survey found that Americans wanted President Obama to talk about 'jobs' in his speech to Congress this past Tuesday, followed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The poll could have been from any number of Muslim communities.

Like Americans, the overwhelming majority of residents of Muslim communities around the world reject attacks on civilians and consider them morally wrong. Those that sympathize with attacks on American civilians are no more religious than the mainstream and defend their position with political ideology, not religious theology, while those who oppose terrorism explain their position in moral or religious terms. The most frequent response to what Muslims should do to improve relations with the West was to modernize, project a more positive image of Islam, and to help stop extremism. It is also interesting to note that among the most frequent responses to the question about their greatest fear was being a victim of terrorism. Violent extremism is a common threat to everyone.

With so much in common, what is standing in the way of greater engagement? Three primary mutually reinforcing perceptions shape America's negative image. They are perceptions stemming from acute conflicts, the perception of political domination, and disrespect.

Acute conflicts: It would be difficult to overstate the sense of moral outrage many Muslim communities feel, especially in the Middle East, about the acute conflicts currently involving the U.S. as a direct or indirect actor. Iraq tops of this list, but also includes Afghanistan and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Majorities around the world, including 90% of Egyptians and 57% of Iranians, believe the invasion of Iraq did more harm than good. Only percentages in the single digits believe the West takes an even-handed approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. When asked what the U.S. can do to improve relations with the Muslim world, people in the Middle East cite the U.S. pursuing a more balanced approach to this conflict near the top of the list. However, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is less central to Muslims in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa except during raging conflict like the past war in Gaza. In addition to these conflicts, other events such as abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prison contribute greatly to the filter of being under attack.

Political domination: Many Muslims around the world, while admiring of Western values, believe the U.S. does not live these values in their treatment of Muslims. For example, significant percentages of Muslims do not believe the U.S. is serious about democracy in their regions. This is the view especially in countries where democratic promotion has been the loudest, such as Egypt, where 72% doubt American promises of democratic support, and Pakistan, where 55% have this view. Doubting American intentions with regard to democracy are closely tied with the perception that America is a hegemonic, neo-colonial power that controls the region. More than 65% of Egyptians, Jordanians, and Iranians believe the U.S. will not allow people in their region to fashion their own political future the way they see fit without direct U.S. influence.

Disrespect: When asked what the West can do to improve relations with the Muslim world, Muslims around the world, whether in Casablanca or Kuala Lumpur talk about respect. They speak about respect as reciprocal and say that Muslims must also show respect for the West to improve relations. However, while the majority of Muslims say they respect the West, most do not believe the West respects them. In some cases, they are right. The majority of Americans also say they do not believe the West respects the Muslim world, and when asked what they admire most about the Muslim world, the most frequent responses were ‘nothing,’ followed by ‘I don’t know.’

What Muslims say they admire most about the West is what they associate most strongly with the U.S. — citizens’ liberties. At the same time, many believe the U.S. is denying Muslims these same rights of self-determination and human rights through support for dictatorships, direct occupation including human rights violations, and what is seen as tacit support for Israeli violence.

To explain the perceived gap between America’s espoused values of democracy, human rights, and self-determination on one hand, and its treatment of Muslims on the other — Muslims turn to the belief that America and its allies must be hostile toward Islam and regard Muslims as inferior. Meaning, since the perceived way Muslims are treated is antithetical to cherished Western values, these same Western powers must be hostile to Islam and Muslims. This perception is compounded by anti-Islamic rhetoric, or the desecration of Islamic symbols, especially by those in positions of authority.

So, not surprisingly, when we asked Muslims worldwide what the West can do to improve relations with the Muslim world, the most frequent responses were for the West to demonstrate more respect for Islam and to regard Muslims as equals, not as inferior. For example, when we asked this question of Lebanese respondents just days after the end of the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel — a conflict respondents blamed on America almost as much as it is blamed on Israel — people had this to say:

“They (the West) should consider us humans and should end war and be at peace with Muslim World.”

“West should treat Muslims equally to improve their relations because they look down upon us.”

Other respondents from around the globe echoed this sentiment. For example, a respondent from Morocco said, “The West has to change and moderate their attitudes towards Muslims. They have to not look down on our people.”

The New Way Forward

This analysis was the basis of a new bipartisan consensus report on U.S.-Muslim engagement, which I took part in drafting, titled “Changing Course”³. The report’s recommendations fall under the three R’s: resolution of violent conflicts, reform (political and economic), and respect (mutual).

Resolution of conflict

Muslims, like all people, want to live safe, prosperous, and free lives. Resolution of violent conflict and responsible withdrawal from occupied land is the most important step we can take to squelch public anger at the U.S. This includes the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as continuing to de-escalate tensions with Iran and Syria. These also include helping to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For these reasons, President Obama’s immediate selection of envoys to these trouble spots was crucial. However, since many of these conflicts are likely to rage on for several more years despite our best intentions, we will need to manage the interim by setting realistic expectations and by speaking and behaving like fair brokers of peace. For example, though we seldom talk in these terms, Palestinians need security as badly as Israelis and bear the brunt of civilian casualties in the conflict. We must therefore talk about and work for security for Israelis *and* Palestinians.

Reform (political and economic)

Reeling from what appeared to many as disastrous policies promoting democracy in the past several years, many are leery of promoting political reform. However, “Changing Course”⁴ concluded it is in our best interests to strengthen institutions of good governance in Muslim communities, support democratic processes — not specific personalities— and widen our definition of acceptable election outcomes. In addition, business partnerships that promote economic growth and job creation are important foundations of a thriving middle class and civil society, which are the bedrocks of democracy.

Respect

Since this is both a priority of President Obama and a critical issue from the perspective of Muslims, I will go into the most detail. According to our research, “respect” is reflected in words and actions. The two most significant statements associated with respect were refraining from desecrating Muslim symbols and treating Muslims fairly in the policies that affect them. Four specific recommendations emerge from our research:

1. *Muslims and Americans vs. violent extremism*: Our language must reflect the reality that the primary victims of violent extremism are Muslims abroad, and that they fear falling victim to political violence

³ “Changing Course: A New Strategy for U.S. Engagement With the Muslim World”

⁴ Ibid

more than Americans do. We are, therefore, natural allies against this common threat. This will mean de-emphasizing the unquenchable demand for mainstream Muslims to condemn terrorism again and again as this assumes their co-membership in one group with the terrorists, instead of with us as fellow victims of the same crime. Use of terms like “Islamic terrorism” or “Jihadists” glorifies the terrorists with religious veneration, while fueling the very perceptions they work to exploit — that America is at war with Islam.

2. *Condemn Islamophobia as un-American.* This is where the U.S. must stand head and shoulders above Europe’s underdeveloped comprehension of free speech. We don’t use public racial slurs, not because they are prohibited in the legal realm, but because our society has evolved beyond them in the moral realm. European societies, for whom living in a multicultural society is still relatively new, must grow in the same way. With all our faults and ongoing struggles, America has something to teach the world about multicultural relations. We have learned through our civil rights struggle, at least in principle, that our democracy is stronger when it no longer excludes entire segments of its citizens, and that our freedom is protected, not compromised, when our definition of civility includes them.

3. *Listening.* While many Muslims are critical of actions carried out by both our government and their own, from the wars in Iraq and Gaza to economic corruption and lack of freedom, the majority reject terrorism as a legitimate response. To further weaken the extremists, instead of defending our way of life, we must listen to — not necessarily agree with — mainstream Muslim concerns over injustice, and engage those peacefully working to address them.

4. *Muslim Americans’ vital role.* Not only are they ambassadors of American inclusiveness, but as one of the most educated and diverse faith communities in the nation⁵, they represent a valuable brain trust for crafting smart, equitable policies for an interdependent world. Groups like the Muslim congressional staff’s association can be a vital resource for thinking about these issues. In addition, Muslim Americans’ legal and social welfare in their own country is viewed as a litmus test for America’s position toward Muslims in general. We must therefore continue to promote our core American values of due process, justice, and equality in our treatment of all.

⁵ “Muslim Americans: A National Portrait,” released by Gallup March 2, 2009 www.MuslimWestFacts.com and www.Gallup.com