



ENGAGING WITH MUSLIM COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

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Introduction

Chairman Kerry, Senator Lugar, and esteemed members of the Committee on Foreign Relations, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the very important topic of engaging Muslim communities around the world. As your invitation to testify indicated, before we can engage Muslim communities, we must first attempt to understand these communities. My testimony will highlight some of the characteristics of Muslim majority countries and the Muslim community in Europe. My recommendations for engagement, in turn, are premised on the belief that we must involve young people in our strategies and use interfaith action to build a better relationship with the Muslim world.

Trends among Muslim Youth

There are several factors that underscore the importance of engaging with young people.

Globalization has given rise to unprecedented interaction among diverse religious communities around the world. Ultimately, it is young people, as they in particular have embraced new forms of global communication, who will decide how these interactions tend. This increased communication has led to new forms of identity engagement amongst youth, which are less reliant on traditional nation-state boundaries and more likely to be influenced by transnational factors. This interaction can lead in one of two directions: conflict or cooperation. The dominant theory that outlines this interaction is the “clash of civilizations” as outlined by Samuel Huntington. Alternately, many see the world through a different paradigm, separating not civilizations but, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., those who choose to live together as brothers or perish as fools.

In Muslim majority countries, three additional trends are at work. First, there is a youth bulge. In Afghanistan and the Gaza Strip, the median age is about 17 years; in Iraq and Pakistan it is barely 20, and in Syria and Saudi Arabia the median is about 21.5 years. This trend extends all over the Middle East and North Africa - the median age is under 27 in Algeria, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan.¹ How these youth express and engage their religious identities has influence far beyond their individual reach. Will we have a generation of young people who believe that their way of being, believing, and belonging is a barrier against diversity, or worse, a bomb to destroy it? Or will young people understand their faith as a bridge to promote equal dignity and mutual loyalty amongst diverse religious communities? I believe that with the appropriate attention and investment, there is an effective way to do the latter.

Second, these youth are faced with changing socio-economic factors that create insecurity. There is a clear lack of job opportunities and services to meet the needs of these youth. The unemployment rates in Afghanistan and the Gaza Strip have been estimated at close to 40%, and in Jordan and Iraq this number is around 30%.² Without gainful employment and the potential for traditional social roles or upward social mobility, these young people are becoming frustrated and lost.

Third, at this moment, as youth seek identity and purpose in their lives, they are confronted with a global religious revival. Scholar Thomas Farr writes “Faith, far from exiting the world’s stage, has played a growing role in human affairs, even as modernization has proceeded apace. Iran’s Shiite revolution in 1979, the Catholic Church’s role in the “third wave” of democratization, the 9/11 attacks - all illustrated just how important a global force religion has become.”³ According to Todd Johnson and David Barrett, “Demographic trends coupled with conservative estimates of conversions and defections envision over 80% of the world’s population will continue to be affiliated to religions 200 years into the future.”⁴ Sociologist Peter Berger states that “the assumption that we live in a

¹ CIA World Factbook

² CIA World Factbook

³ Farr, Thomas. “Diplomacy in an Age of Faith: Religious Freedom and National Security,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 2. Pg 110.

⁴ Farr 112.

secularized world is false [...] The world today [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”⁵

Religion remains a primary source of identification for many and is a robust transnational identifier. Groups who promote intolerance, violence, and segregation have used religious identification in young people to actively promote division and mistrust. The power of religion, however, can be used by youth to build peace and productive engagement.

Youth identity is not an issue that is relevant only in the Middle East. Muslim communities in Western Europe are a key demographic that cannot be ignored. As of 2003, there were 15 million Muslims in the European Union (three times more than in the United States at the time). Moreover, in 2003 the Muslim birth rate in Europe was triple that of the non-Muslim birth rate. By 2015, the Muslim population in Europe will have doubled, while the non-Muslim population will have declined by 3.5%.⁶ Many of these European young Muslims face issues such as discrimination, economic deprivation, underemployment, and residence in ghettoized communities. Among native-born Muslims in Europe, there is often a feeling that they do not have a stake in larger society, and must choose between their religion and citizenship.

Two trainers from Interfaith Youth Core recently traveled to Italy, Spain, France, UK, Netherlands, and Belgium to deliver a series of “Religious Pluralism” trainings to audiences of religious youth, many of whom were Muslim. We observed a widespread sense of frustration amongst Muslim youth at their inability to freely express their religious identity, a feeling of isolation, and a willingness to identify oneself in opposition to the larger society. It is imperative to engage these groups, increase youth capacity as bridge builders between communities, and help them form social networks and partnerships beyond their faith communities.

Religious Extremism is a Youth Movement

The United States can be a better partner in engaging Muslim communities around the world by realizing the power of investing in young people. If we are not engaging and educating young people in interfaith cooperation, there are others who are pushing them towards extremism.

Osama bin Laden, for example, is a brilliant youth organizer. At fourteen, he was recruited to an after-school Islamic study group where the organizer, a young adult, introduced to him the idea of violence as a means towards fulfilling religious obligations. At university, Osama fell under the spell of a radical, charismatic teacher, Abdullah Azzam. A Palestinian who had joined the Muslim Brotherhood as a young man and later helped found Hamas, Azzam wanted to find a way to make Sayyid Qutb’s vision of the violent overthrow of corrupt regimes a reality. Azzam traveled around the world to spread his message, raising money and recruiting young people to join the armed effort. He opened dozens of recruitment centers, known as services offices. Osama bin Laden was the first to answer Azzam’s call. At the age of twenty-three, he financed Azzam’s Peshawar Services Office. It was here that bin Laden met a young doctor from a prominent Cairo family, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The two were struck by the range, quantity, and commitment of Muslim youths pouring into Peshawar, eager to wage jihad. Like entrepreneurs, they realized the potential of this massive market of young Muslims for the “product” of totalitarian Islam. The result of this recruitment was an international network of Muslim youths schooled in the ideology of totalitarian Islam, taught to hate the “imperialist infidel”, and trained to kill - and that is who became Al Qaeda.

Just as a skilled totalitarian youth organizer convinced a young Osama to answer the call of jihad through stories of the power of youth to return the *ummah* (collective Muslim community) to glory, so bin Laden is doing the same for this generation.

⁵ Berger, Peter. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999. Pg 2.

⁶ Taspinar, Omer. “Europe’s Main Street,” *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2003.

Bruce Riedel describes Al-Qaeda as a set of highly effective leaders who have created a compelling narrative, based partly on American missteps in the Muslim world, and a remarkably resilient organizational structure that seduces a small group of young Muslims to destroy in a highly strategic manner.⁷ This combination of effective leaders, compelling narrative, resilient structure, willing youth and strategic destruction is one that can be defeated with the right vision, message and strategy. To counteract those like bin Laden who see an inevitable conflict between the Muslim world and the West, we must invest in young people to build religious pluralism and cooperation and take interfaith action.

Opportunities for Engaging Youth towards Interfaith Cooperation

Interfaith action counters the clash of civilizations and is an alternative way to engage young people of faith. It focuses not on our differences, but on our shared potential. Instead of pitting people of different religions against one another in an endless war, interfaith action builds mutual respect and understanding through cooperative service and constructive dialogue.

Looking back we see alternative models for how young people of faith can positively engage a religiously diverse world. Consider the young Martin Luther King Jr., a devout Christian who worked with Jewish leaders and used the methods of a Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian Hindu, to build a more just and equitable America. Learning from King, we must empower young people of faith to work with those of different religions to foster peace and cooperation.

This is not just a Christian or Hindu philosophy, it is also found in Islam. The tradition of Islam teaches the importance of interfaith cooperation and a central tenet of the tradition is one which embraces diversity and promotes pluralism. The Quran states "O Mankind, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous of you." (Quran 49:13). There are many examples of Muslims who have promoted pluralism, from the Muslims in South Africa who joined the struggle against apartheid to Badshah Khan, a Pashtun who was inspired by Gandhi's non violent approach, and recruited thousands of young Muslims to rally for a free Subcontinent.

The organization I founded and lead, Interfaith Youth Core, brings young people of different faiths together to serve others by building houses, serving the poor or restoring the environment. From this shared service experience, Interfaith Youth Core helps young people realize the *shared values* of all religions, such as compassion, mercy and peace. Service to others and a shared values dialogue help young people understand how they can maintain their own faith identity while working together with those from different faiths to create not a clash of civilizations, but a more peaceful and just world.

When I attended interfaith conferences as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, I saw that they were filled with senior religious leaders. I also recognized that those who were on the front lines of religious violence were not senior theologians, but young people. If movements of violent extremism were mobilizing thousands of young people to action everyday, and the interfaith movement only involved theologians and academics gathering at conferences, we would forfeit the ground to terrorists. It was upon this realization that I founded the Interfaith Youth Core to build a global movement of young leaders taking action to advance religious pluralism.

Interfaith Youth Core affirms and strengthens the religious identity of young people while helping them embrace the vision of religious pluralism. We nurture their leadership skills and invest in them with resources and opportunities worthy of their boundless potential for good. We connect them with one another to form networks so they will understand the world's diversity on a personal level and be empowered by other interfaith leaders.

As indicated above, last month two Interfaith Youth Core staff members, both Muslim women, embarked on a three week training tour across Western Europe supported by the State Department. They conducted trainings for about 400 young European interfaith leaders in Belgium, the Netherlands,

⁷ Riedel, Bruce. *The Search for Al Qaeda*, Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

Italy, Spain and France, with the goal of sparking an interfaith youth movement across Europe. Many of the communities they visited included recent Muslim immigrants to Western Europe, as well as established Muslim minority communities. The goal of this training trip was to build bridges between communities in Western Europe and illustrate a new way of engaging people of different faiths including the Muslim community.

This grant gave Interfaith Youth Core the opportunity to spread the message of religious pluralism, expand our network of interfaith bridge builders, and gain valuable experience of the context of the countries we visited. It gave Interfaith Youth Core the opportunity to begin to plant the seed for interfaith cooperation; however a greater investment needs to be made to take this to scale.

We have been on the ground in over a dozen countries, and we currently have several more pending requests for our services by the State Department. Though this approach is fruitful, it has been too ad hoc and scattered; it needs to be more strategic. There needs to be a structure in place in government institutions that enable a more coherent and full scale approach.

Recommendations:

The US needs to involve young people in our engagement strategies and use interfaith action to build a better relationship with the Muslim world. Interfaith cooperation is one most critical issues of the 21st century and it is imperative to equip young leaders to take action. The following are a set of recommendations towards realizing this goal.

1. Promote religious pluralism as a core commitment globally. Religious pluralism in the United States can serve as a model for engaging religious diversity around the world.
 - Change the framework of US Engagement with Muslim communities from the “clash of civilizations” to the framework of “pluralism vs. extremism”.
 - Rather than the current characterization of counterterrorism efforts as “freedom and democracy versus terrorist ideology”, policymakers should frame the battle of ideas as a conflict between terrorist elements in the Muslim world and Islam.
2. Empower young leaders to advance interfaith cooperation in their communities.
 - Government should identify and amplify civil society forces that have innovative and effective models that promote youth-led interfaith cooperation.
 - Equip young leaders with the knowledge base and skill set for interfaith action.
 - Invest in institutions that focus on increasing the training and capacity building of interfaith leaders.
3. Continue to prioritize citizen diplomacy efforts for engagement with Muslim communities around the world.
 - Facilitate interfaith exchanges, cross-cultural education, and religious literacy programs in a public diplomacy initiative that is coherent, strategic and comprehensive in nature.
 - Enable partnerships between US institutions and partners in Muslim communities around the world.
 - Highlight the Muslim American community as a key example of America’s vibrant pluralism, and use them as citizen diplomats to engage other communities around the world.