

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum

Catalyzing an upward spiral in Western relations with the Global Muslim Community
March 11th, 2008

Moderator: **Leena El-Ali**

Panelists: **Dalia Mogahed, Emmanuel Kattan and William M. Belding**

A perceived downward spiral currently shapes Western relations with the Muslim communities around the world. Fortunately, there are initiatives in place at several levels – governmental, multi-lateral and civil society – to shape better understanding and improve relations between Western and Muslim cultures and communities. This month's forum highlighted the goals of these initiatives and how they work toward creating positive changes. Our distinguished panelists addressed key questions such as: How are these initiatives improving understanding, and promoting engagement and cooperative relations among cultures and religions? How are these initiatives helping to counter the forces that fuel polarization and extremism? How are these initiatives shifting U.S. and Muslim public opinion, and contributing to change in domestic and international policy?

Dalia Mogahed (Gallup Center)

Ms. Mogahed began by explaining the rationale behind *Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think*—a book she co-authored with John Esposito. She detailed some findings of their poll, which represents the opinions of more than 90% of the global Muslim community, including more than 40 Muslim countries around the world.

Ms. Mogahed's research shows that the relationship between the so-called "Muslim World" and the "Western World" is determined by how Muslims think they are perceived by westerners. The heart of the issue is that Muslims think Westerners don't respect their values. On the other hand, Muslims admire Western advancements in technology and democracy.

Ms. Mogahed continued by asking: "What needs to change?" She believes Westerners need to stop looking down on Muslims. While they needn't accommodate Muslim lifestyles, Westerners should develop a more egalitarian notion of their differences. For example, the book's research shows that Westerners admire little to nothing about Muslims, which has produced asymmetrical knowledge between the two groups. Accordingly, Westerners should learn more about Muslims.

Only 7% of Muslims sympathize with the 9/11 attacks or condone violent ways of achieving revolution, explained Ms. Mogahed. But their research shows no difference in religiosity between those who sympathize with the attacks, and those who condemn them. What differentiates the two, she said, is that sympathizers strongly fear being controlled by the West. Their greatest fear about Westerners is a U.S. occupation that would threaten their sovereignty.

Emmanuel Kattan (The Alliance of Civilizations)

Mr. Kattan spoke briefly about the UN's Alliance of Civilizations. A High-level Group was nominated by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples of all cultures and religions. The group

was co-sponsored by the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey after the bombing attacks of 2004.

Composed of twenty prominent leaders in the fields of politics, academia, civil society, international finance and media from around the world, the High-level Group guides the work of the Alliance of Civilizations, assessing the forces that contribute to extremism, and recommending collective action to counter these forces. It produced a report that prioritizes relations between Muslim and Western societies, recommending initiatives in media, education and youth. The report states that the common feature among both societies is a sense that values are under attack, and that polarization is due to political and not religious causes. Until these political issues are resolved, little will progress.

Mr. Kattan then introduced some initiatives the Alliance has put in place. In education, the focus is to change perceptions – starting with young children – by introducing online media that teach world religions. It is also important to work with universities to develop history textbooks through UNESCO. In media, in order to diminish incidents like the current cartoon controversy, there needs to be more forces to balance or diminish tension, like rapid response media. Op-eds written by high personalities and signed by religious leaders would instill a greater level of understanding. Another media initiative produces mainstream films that portray minorities in a less prejudiced way. In youth involvement, the Madrid forum developed the global employment initiative to connect people in the Middle East with job networks. In addition, there are smaller initiatives also aimed at generating cross-cultural understanding.

William M. Belding (U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project)

Mr. Belding introduced the US-Muslim Engagement Project, which is working to create a coherent, broad-based, bipartisan set of strategies to improve relations between the United States and the Muslim world. The project aims to communicate and advocate those strategies in ways that shift U.S. public opinion and contribute to changes in U.S. policy.

About 2 years ago, Search for Common Ground and the Consensus Building Institute realized at the same time they wanted to work on such a project, said Mr. Belding. And in January 2007, the engagement was launched. The project takes a unique top-down and bottom-up approach, supported at the grassroots level, and driven by a leadership group comprising some of the nation's best political, diplomatic, religious, academic and business leaders.

The project will issue a consensus report and begin an intensive education campaign by mid-2008. Some of the strategies included in the report will be: (1) Building trust and respect through cultural exchange, language training and building of common language; (2) Stimulating economic development in the Middle East through vocation education; (3) Reforming U.S. policies by shifting the balance between human rights and national sovereignty; and (4) Providing insights about the U.S. approach to regional conflicts in the Middle East.

While building consensus has been difficult for Mr. Belding, the results of the dialogue process have been fascinating. He concluded by saying that the current political rhetoric is not positive, but the project is supported by both Republican and Democratic advisors.