



U.S.-Muslim engagement seen as key to security, prosperity

By Elizabeth Wood

Oct 1, 2008

WASHINGTON (BP)--Deep misunderstandings between the United States and Muslim communities around the world are causing serious problems and solving them will require constructing "bridges of understanding," says the president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

"Polls show there is a huge lack of understanding of Americans in the Muslim world. We need to broaden and deepen the understanding on both sides," Richard Land said. "The U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project will galvanize every aspect of American society to engage the Muslim society."

The U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project is a broad bipartisan coalition that recently completed 18 months of extensive research into the challenge of reversing extremism, increasing international security and improving relations with the Muslim community. The project's 33-member leadership group included, among others, the ERLC's Land, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former Texas congressman Steve Bartlett, and former Minnesota congressman Vin Webber.

The group, which had 11 Muslim-American members and was supported in its work by Search for Common Ground and the Consensus Building Institute, held a briefing Sept. 24 on its report -- entitled "Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World" -- at the Rayburn House Office Building and a press conference at the National Press Club.

"This initiative is a serious, comprehensive, bipartisan effort that seeks to address a critical problem: The world Muslim community misunderstands Americans and Americans misunderstand them," Land said in a written endorsement. "This initiative lays out a detailed and comprehensive plan to vastly decrease that misunderstanding through a multi-faceted approach that will build constructive bridges of mutual understanding between Americans and Muslim world."

The group's plan calls for significant shifts in American foreign policy to create a safer U.S. and a better world and suggests a "new blueprint" on how to reconstruct America's relationship with Muslims around the world, said Stephen Heintz, president of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Project leadership has called for the next president of the U.S. to recognize the importance of improving U.S.-Muslim relations in his inaugural speech.

"We hope this work will be taken seriously in the presidential campaign," Heintz said. "We look forward to working with the next administration, because this is going to take a significant presidential leadership and ongoing leadership from the Congress of the U.S."

The report suggests a "four pillar approach" for U.S.-Muslim engagement: 1) diplomacy as the "primary tool for resolving conflicts involving Muslim countries," 2) efforts "to improve governance and promote civic participation in Muslim countries, and advocate for principles rather than parties in their internal political contests," 3) an emphasis on "job-creating growth in Muslim countries," and 4) a focus on improving "respect

and understanding between Americans and Muslims around the world."

"The leadership group believes that we must elevate diplomacy for conflict resolution," said Land, who is also a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. "The leadership group, the U.S. military and the U.S. public all recognize the limits of military force and the need for a more comprehensive set of tools to resolve conflicts with and within Muslim countries. Military force may be necessary but is not sufficient alone to defeat extremists in Muslim countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan or prevent attacks elsewhere," he continued.

"As the late, great Winston Churchill once said, 'To jaw-jaw is ... better than war-war,'" Land said.

Land said U.S. military leaders are not averse to diplomatic, political and economic initiatives to aid in the isolation and defeat of Islamic extremists.

"By changing our approach, we will also help reverse the widespread perception of Muslims around the world that the U.S. is engaged in a 'war on Islam,'" Land said.

Contrary to popular belief, most Muslims are not supportive of extremists and terrorists, said Ingrid Mattson, president of Islamic Society of North America. Like most Americans, they desire to experience democracy and freedom in their countries and communities.

Both Mattson and Land noted Islamic terrorists have killed more Muslims than non-Muslims.

"At best, only five percent of the worldwide Muslim community supports terrorists," Land said. "In effect what you have in these terrorists groups is a 'death cult' that is taken root within Islam.

"For instance, in Iraq 12 uniformed Iraqi police and military have been killed by terrorists for every one American uniformed service person who has been killed. These Iraqis have been killed because they refused to knuckle under to this death cult's radical and twisted interpretation of Islam," he said. "Americans need to understand this is a gross distortion of Islam as a whole," Land stressed.

The need for improving governance is also crucial to building better relations between the U.S. and Muslim worlds.

Dalia Mogahed, senior analyst and executive director of Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, said the U.S. should support good governments in the Muslim world.

"Far from hating democracy or rejecting it, it is what they admire most about the West," Mogahed said.

"Instead of pushing specific personalities or substituting mere elections for democracy, we should instead build robust institutions.... Instead of pushing specific parties, we should have a principled approach to governance and democracy promotion in the Muslim world."

According to Marc Gopin, a professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., millions of devout Muslims are serious about democracy. He said they are struggling and Americans should invite them to become partners in building a civilized global community.

To create jobs and increase economic development in Muslim communities, the leadership group suggests engagement between "leaders in the education, commercial and investment communities, both in the U.S. and in Muslim countries and communities."

"The biggest economic challenges in Muslim countries are creating jobs for young people and encouraging a shift in mindset and structure that allows entrepreneurship and some action come to be," said Ahmed Younis, senior analyst of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies.

Younis said there is a limited employment opportunity for young Muslim people. Even though the U.S. is not responsible for their economic conditions, it is easy for Muslim people to focus their frustrations on the U.S. government.

Red Cavaney, president and chief executive officer of American Petroleum Institute, said the next president has an opportunity to commit to building economic opportunity by meeting with Muslim states and institutional leaders.

Mattson said engagement in the U.S. and Muslim world is a huge part of ensuring U.S. security.

Tom Dine, former executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, said, "It is late in the day, but never too late, for American policy makers to alter their mindset about Islam and the Muslim communities, and to try and act on the common ground that exists between the peoples and government of the United States and global Muslim societies."

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