

September 24, 2008

## Report Seeks Engagement With Muslims by Diplomacy

By [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#)

After 18 months spent examining the deteriorating relations between the United States and the Muslim world during the Bush administration, a diverse group of American leaders will release a [report](#) in Washington on Wednesday calling for an overhaul of American strategy to reverse the spread of terrorism and extremism.

The report recommends more diplomatic engagement, even with Iran and other adversaries, and a major investment in economic development in Muslim countries to create jobs for alienated youth. It calls on the next president to use his Inaugural Address to signal a shift in approach, to immediately renounce the use of torture, and to appoint a special envoy within the first three months to jump-start negotiations between Israel and the [Palestinians](#).

The report, [“Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World,”](#); was produced by 34 leaders drawn from religious, business, military, foreign policy, academic, foundation and nonprofit circles. The group included Democrats like [Madeleine K. Albright](#), who was secretary of state under President [Bill Clinton](#), and two former Republican congressmen, Vin Weber and Steve Bartlett.

It also included Thomas Dine, a former executive director of the [American Israel Public Affairs Committee](#), and Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America. One-third of the group were Muslim Americans. The members were selected by the sponsoring organizations, [Search for Common Ground](#) and the [Consensus Building Institute](#), which both promote nonviolent conflict resolution.

“I came into it somewhat skeptical we could come to agreement,” Mr. Weber, who is now chairman of the National Endowment for Democracy, said in an interview. “I supported the invasion of Iraq, and that has clearly been a very negative thing for the perceptions of America in the Muslim world.”

As the group pored over polls of people in various Muslim countries, they concluded that the negative perceptions were generated more by American policies than by Muslim religious or cultural beliefs. If policies shift, perceptions are likely to change, too, the report says.

Dalia Mogahed, executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, said polls showed that people in Muslim countries feel “disrespected” by the United States, a sentiment that intensified with the invasion of Iraq and the photographs from Abu Ghraib prison showing detainees tortured and humiliated.

Ms. Mogahed said, “People have told us they admire our democratic values, but there’s this gap between the values people admire and the perceived treatment of Muslims.”

Ms. Albright said in an interview: “We’re not involved in a clash of civilizations or conflicting religious beliefs. There are policies and actions that are at the root of it, and in some cases they are our policies and in some cases theirs.”

The group’s four basic recommendations are to rely on diplomacy as the “primary tool,” promote better governance in authoritarian Muslim countries that are American allies like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, help create jobs and economic development in Muslim countries, and foster exchange programs to educate people in the Muslim world about the United States, and vice versa.

“The urgency is quite great,” Mr. Weber said. “The Bush administration is held in low regard in the Muslim world, and unfortunately that’s led to America being held in low regard.”

The McCain and Obama campaigns have been briefed on the report’s recommendations, and both were receptive, said Mr. Weber and other members of the group. There is a briefing on Wednesday for the House Foreign Affairs Committee and members of Congress, and a public release at the National Press Club in Washington.

Senator [Richard G. Lugar](#) of Indiana, the Republican leader of the Foreign Relations Committee, has sent the report to his colleagues with a letter saying it contains “constructive recommendations on how we can approach this pressing concern in a bipartisan framework.”

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---