

American Panel Recommends New Direction for US-Muslim Relations

By Mohamed Elshinnawi
Washington
01 October 2008

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Thirty-four prominent Americans, including former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former U.S. envoy to the Middle East Dennis Ross, say in a report that the next U.S. president must develop a new approach to Muslim countries. The report is a joint venture between two non-profit organizations -- the Search for Common Ground and the Consensus Building Institute -- in Washington D.C. It is aimed at moving beyond conflict, misunderstanding and mistrust. Mohamed Elshinnawi has more.

Since the terror attacks of 2001 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, tensions with many Muslim countries have increased.

In many of these countries, the U.S. administration -- and by extension the United States as a whole -- have become unpopular. The war on terror has often been seen as a war on Islam.

Despite U.S. statements to the contrary, Arabs tend to believe the U.S. is profoundly anti-Muslim. U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict -- perceived as favoring the Jewish state -- has not helped.

The report's authors say the U.S. should adopt a new direction.

"Our report has a four-pillar strategy," said David Fairman, the project's co-director. "The first is conflict resolution primarily through diplomacy. The second is improving governance and civic participation in Muslim countries in partnership without dictating the form in which governance or democratic development takes. The third is working together on mutually beneficial economic partnerships for job creation and development in Muslim countries and also trade and markets for the U.S. And the last is building mutual respect and understanding between our societies and our people at every level."

He says the U.S. presidential campaign determined the timing of the report's release. The group wanted to give Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama food for thought on foreign policy.

"We recommend that the next president clearly call on the country to take on the goal of improving relations with the Muslim world as a top foreign policy priority from the very



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beginning of the administration," added Fairman.

Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America and a member of the group, says the report offers an alternative to a strategy that fueled Muslim hostility toward the U.S.

According to Mattson, "We recognized in the report the importance of media, media portrayal of Islam and Muslims as well as media portrayal of Americans in the Muslim world. So, we need to make sure that these things happen simultaneously, that there is good policies but there is also good information and dialogue at all levels of the general population."

Ahmed Younis is a senior analyst with the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies. The group polled Muslims around the world.

Younis said, "the launching point for the recommendations that were put in the report is the opinions of Muslims and Arabs about how the U.S. should change how it engages with their societies and with their countries."

Authors of the report hope it will help shape public opinion in the U.S. and contribute to changes in U.S policies toward the Islamic World.



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