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AMERICA'S PRIORITIES IN THE FUTURE OF US-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*A Critical Analysis of Changing Course:
A New Direction for US Relations with the
Muslim World*

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *CHANGING COURSE: A NEW DIRECTION FOR US RELATIONS WITH
THE MUSLIM WORLD*

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✎ The *Tabah Analytic Briefs series* aims to empower Tabah clientele – Shari'ah scholars and Muslim opinion leaders – with background information and critical analysis of contemporary events and debates. Each brief is a concise introduction to a concept or topic relating to culture and social change in the global community. The purpose of this series is to provide vital information that will assist scholars and policy makers in formulating a clear conception of the “Shared Public Space”, developing an informed discourse, and mediating the challenges facing the Muslim world today.

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AMERICA'S PRIORITIES IN THE FUTURE OF US-MUSLIM RELATIONS

A Critical Analysis of Changing Course: A New Direction for US Relations with the Muslim World

Subject: A summary and analysis of *Changing Course: A New Direction for US Relations with the Muslim World*, a report of a 34-member bipartisan leadership group recommending best strategies for improving America's relationships with Muslim countries and communities.

Significance: As the product of major American thinkers, politicians, and businesspersons, *Changing Course* signals and confirms the American government's desire for a new, more respectful mode of engagement between the US and Muslim countries and communities. In the interests of national (US) and international security, the report advocates for renewed dialogue, open channels of communication, and new strategies of cooperation, whether economically, politically, or otherwise.

Executive Summary: The following is a summary and analysis of *Changing Course: A New Direction for US Relations with the Muslim World*, a report of the Leadership Group on US-Muslim Engagement¹ convened by Search for Common Ground² and The Consensus Building Institute.³ Through this report, the Leadership Group advocates a new strategy for US-Muslim relations based on the following four pillars:

- diplomacy over coercion
- improving governance in Muslim countries
- promoting economic growth and opportunity
- enhancing mutual understanding

Confirming a positive arc in a changed American political climate, the report should be carefully studied by Muslim communities worldwide. A proper response will demand cooperation across internal Muslim boundaries and a strong contribution from the scholarly community.

1. The Report can be found at the following website, <http://www.usmuslimengagement.org/> (In Arabic, http://www.usmuslimengagement.org/storage/usme/documents/Changing_Course_Arabic.pdf)
2. <http://www.sfcg.org/>
3. <http://cbuilding.org/>

ANALYSIS

BEGINNING in January 2007, a 34-member bipartisan leadership group first convened to consider the best strategies for improving America's relationship with Muslim countries and communities. These leaders include former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, two former members of Congress, major representatives of Washington think tanks and political action committees (such as Dennis Ross of the neoconservative Washington Institute for Near East Policy), alongside several prominent Muslim leaders, including Dr. Ingrid Mattson, President of the Islamic Society of North America; Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Chairman of the Cordoba Initiative; Abdullah Schleifer, editor-at-large of *Islamica Magazine*; Ziad Asali, President of the American Task Force on Palestine; and Daisy Khan, Executive Director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement.

Before summarizing the report, it is necessary to draw attention to the following: First, the report's primary intention is to advance America's national priorities and "international security", albeit through a more sophisticated and diplomatic strategy. Second and of far greater concern, the Report is not the product of a sustained dialogue with non-American Muslims. The leadership group involves few persons based outside of the United States, an omission the implications of which I will return to (although this observation should not be understood to imply that the leadership group does not have significant dealings and interactions outside the United States, or that the significance of American Muslim participation should be in any way underestimated or devalued).

The report is divided into five main sections:

1. Why are US relations with Muslim countries and communities important?
2. Guiding principles for improving US-Muslim relations.
3. The current state of US-Muslim relations.
4. Implementing the strategy.
5. Recommendations for leaders and citizens.

WHY AMERICA NEEDS A NEW STRATEGY

Sections 1 and 2 summarize the need for a changed direction in mutual relations, as well as the need for qualified persons and institutions that can most effectively realize this new direction. Section 1 cites a number of studies indicating that Muslim hostility towards the United States has cost the country valuable resources, international reputation, and perhaps long-term security. Since the report argues that it is "policies and actions," and not inherent incompatibility, that cause these tensions, leaders on both sides can work together to find more positive alternatives. Significantly, the mood is favorable on both sides: "The vast majority of Americans and Muslims around the world want peace, amicable relations, good governance, prosperity, and respect." In Section 2, the report makes special mention of the important role non-governmental actors can play; for example, business-to-business

contacts can help develop Muslim economies and, in so doing, improve public perceptions of the United States.

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS? PAST FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES SHAPE PRESENT TENSIONS

Section 3 discusses the current state of US-Muslim relations and traces many current tensions to three US foreign policy priorities. Firstly, the United States created and still maintains alliances with Muslim governments based on a common opposition to Communism, well past the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ideological basis for such support. Significantly, such alliances prioritized the containment of Communism; the retardation of regional political and social development was rarely of concern.⁴ Second, the United States has shaped its Middle East policy around the stability and security of oil production and supply. Third, successive American administrations have insisted on strong support for Israel while only “seeking intermittently to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict,” support which has cemented the perception that the United States does not consider the Arab and Muslim worlds as entitled to the rights and privileges Western societies benefit from. The American response to the September 11th attacks, especially the occupation of Iraq, did not take into account the effect of these three priorities on US-Muslim relations, but instead pursued actions that aggravated existing grievances and created new ones. Yet despite this turbulent history, the report estimates that the vast majority of Muslims (often over 90 percent) desire improved relations with the United States.

IDENTIFYING AND REMEDYING CORE CAUSES OF CURRENT TENSION

On that optimistic note, Section 4 takes us from historical causes to contemporary realities. The “core causes of tension” between the US and the Muslim world, the report proffers, are:

- “Violent conflicts” in Muslim regions and countries, such as Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan; Muslim extremist attacks on civilians worldwide.
- Ongoing US patronage of authoritarian governments.
- Economic underdevelopment and mismanagement in many Muslim countries.
- “Serious misunderstanding, distrust and disrespect between non-Muslim Americans and Muslim communities.”

Since a continuation of the Bush Administration’s policies is widely considered both impractical and counter-productive, the report suggests resetting US-Muslim relationships based on the following four pillars:

- Elevating diplomacy as “the primary tool for resolving key conflicts” and opening such diplomacy to both allies and adversaries.

4. A brilliant examination of this history, and its contemporary effects, can be found in Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: the Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

- Supporting democratic and legal reform in Muslim countries, including advocating for principles rather than parties in the course of political contest.
- Advancing job-creating growth in Muslim countries by utilizing American expertise and Muslim needs to mutual benefit.
- Funding education in the Muslim world and the United States to remove sources of misunderstanding and to create a deeper appreciation for the other.

There are significant instances in which these recommendations correlate with the Obama Administration's policies. On the topic of diplomacy, for example, the report argues that engagement with Iran is far more likely to establish regional stability and satisfy American and Israeli security concerns. The Obama Administration has also made it a point to stress its interest in dialogue with Iran. Likewise, the report advocates that the US renew its commitment to a viable two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The report even argues that sustained US efforts in this direction demand a special envoy, with "stature, credibility and authority comparable to that of Senator George Mitchell in the Northern Ireland peace process." In fact, President Obama has selected Senator Mitchell for exactly this role, and while we cannot know to what extent this report may have influenced this and other foreign policy decisions, such convergence only underscores the relevance of the report to understanding current American thinking.

THE NEED FOR THE MUSLIM WORLD TO RESPOND

WHERE THE REPORT ERRS, AND WHY

Broadcasting such a positive message, this report demands a Muslim response, albeit one that can remedy certain shortcomings, present a strong Muslim consensus, and claim a scholarly mandate authoritative enough to effectively articulate the way forward. Beginning with the first of these points, I will highlight how and why this report avoids some topics of disagreement and paints an incomplete picture of the driving tensions behind current conflicts.

On this first point, the report does not adequately define the key concepts it engages, such as extremism and terrorism. This is certainly problematic considering the importance of such definitions when trying to understand ongoing conflicts. Likewise, the report encourages American support for democratic reforms but avoids exploring what such reforms should ultimately look like. A Muslim response must intervene with the expectation that such topics are seriously explored, if not always defined to joint satisfaction. More critically, the report operates on the assumption of a rather fixed relationship between the United States, on the one hand, and the Muslim world on the other. The framework leaves out the radical imbalance that undoubtedly exists between the resources and singularity of purpose reflected by the world's wealthiest country and a Muslim world divided into squabbling and sometimes ineffective states. This is of concern for many reasons, one of the most salient being the unwillingness to debate the role competing state interests will have on the possi-



bility of improved relations. How, for example, can the report suggest US reconciliation with Iran when any such reconciliation could threaten American allies such as Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia? Considering recent Israeli elections, which resulted in a major gain for that country's far right, what would the leadership group suggest are Senator Mitchell's options for pushing a two-state solution?

On the second point, the report sometimes relies on survey results whose relevance to national and international politics is unclear. For example, while many Muslims undoubtedly desire improved relations with the US, it is likely these Muslims also see the international community (largely a concept created and deployed by the West) as biased against them. How should these apparently contradictory sentiments be reconciled? In the same way, we should be cautious about any attempt to base policy on popular opinion when that opinion is not weighed against economic realities and national sentiments. Both the aforementioned points are, in part, the product of a fundamental forgetfulness at the heart of this report: the leadership group is composed almost entirely of Americans or persons whose institutional affiliations are overwhelmingly in the United States. While this is a positive report in many ways, it is nevertheless necessary that an adequate response represent the concerns of those Muslim countries and communities it advocates dialogue with.

AN EFFECTIVE MUSLIM RESPONSE: NEW INSTITUTIONS, OLD BOUNDARIES

In the Muslim world's pursuit of improved relations with the United States, there must be a convergence of institutions across the Muslim world, crossing regional and theological boundaries. We can take Al-Jazeera as an instructive example of what benefit this can bring: Al-Jazeera first made it possible for Arabs to learn about each other without an intervening foreign medium or intrusive censorship.⁵ While the report bemoans the unfortunate ignorance of many Americans when it comes to Islam and Islamic civilization, much the same can be applied to the Muslim world. For too long, Muslim countries have had minimal relations between their populations, looking only to their former colonizer and current economic powers. While this is understandable, it is not acceptable. The instability of the Muslim world has been in part a product of the inability of the Muslim world to construct institutions that can moderate sentiment and search for common ground; now that America, at its highest levels, wants a new relationship with the Muslim world, the latter cannot afford internal indecision.

But it is not enough for the Muslim world to respond; this response must contain a strong Islamic component. The Islamic scholar must insist on working with top minds and leaders for the sake of cooperation, as well as the development and prosperity of his or her community that such cooperation could potentially generate. Muslim scholars should consider promoting research both within their institutions and in public conversation on the report's

5. Al Jazeera English has further extended the reach of such media; there is significant talk of an Al Jazeera Urdu as well, which could potentially reach several hundred million persons. For the Muslim world to cooperate it must first be informed and, considering the cost involved, media is an astonishingly effective and potent means by which disconnected communities can come to learn of each other and from each other without intervening foreign agendas. Imagine what benefits in dialogue, cooperation, and mutual benefit – and at what cost – would be realized by having Al Jazeera reach out to the Malay-speaking Muslim Far East, numbering some quarter-billion co-religionists (practically the size of the Arab world).

final strategy. There are not enough Muslim scholars broadcasting the importance of dialogue and diplomacy, within and without. The same can be said for efforts towards mutual understanding; how many Muslim seminaries encourage a study of the West? How many offer any level of serious research into US-Muslim relations and the like? And while many Muslim scholars have engaged the topic of democratic reform, there must be more cooperation across regional boundaries to understand and benefit from local experiences and historical perspectives in realizing such reform. Certainly, the Arab world would benefit from a sustained study of democracy in similar societies, economically and culturally speaking, rather than exclusively consulting with Western specialists. Lastly, Muslim scholars must be at the vanguard of economic discussions, all the more important because the weight of economic power lies with the United States.

The Obama Administration's need to reach out to the Muslim world requires partners on the other side, and the strong involvement of Muslim scholars (*'ulama*) can help give this dialogue the legitimacy it requires.

Conclusion: Considering the persons and interests represented by the *Changing Course* report, and its apparent convergence with the Obama administration's foreign policy direction, it is clear that prominent Americans want and need dialogue. In light of a global economic crisis, the need for dialogue has received new emphasis, as effective remedies will require internationally coordinated responses. It is up to the Muslim world to seize the opportunity and intelligently pursue strategies for mutual benefit; the significance of this window must not be underestimated, and the Muslim world, especially its scholarly class, must be willing to overcome old tensions and boundaries if it wishes to keep pace. The alternative would be further exclusion of the Muslim world from an evolving global order, and the economic, political and social costs that would involve, both to our moral economy and to our rapidly growing populations.