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## US losing the race to engage Muslims

By RUSS FEINGOLD

WASHINGTON

**J**UST days ago, I folded myself into a US embassy vehicle in Bamako, Mali, fresh off the plane from Timbuktu, the historic center of Islamic learning and trans-Saharan trade in the north of the country. Looking out the car window, I saw that thousands of cheering Malians were lining the streets of this city, which had been cleared for VIP travel. I admit, I was stunned by this outpouring of enthusiasm for the American ambassador and an American senator.

Then I realized that they weren't there for us. They were waiting to cheer the motorcade of Iranian President Mohamad Khatami, whose plane had just landed at the airport.

Bamako's reception for the Iranian president should be a wake-up call for US policymakers. We need to do much more to reach out to struggling countries like Mali. If we don't, other influences may step in to fill the void.

Driving into Bamako, I had been mulling over the meetings I'd had in Timbuktu with imams and local officials to hear their views of the terrorist threat that has emerged in their region, to listen to their concerns about US policies, and to find out how we can work together. The Malians I met, like the Algerians and Nigerians and Kenyans I have met, do not hate the US, although many have grave concerns about some of our policies. Malians I spoke with had concerns about everything from the invasion of Iraq to the effect of US trade policies on Mali's textile industry. They are

happy to discuss their views on issues of terrorism. But they're even more interested in talking about their own priority: the fight against poverty, the struggle for a reason to hope that life for their children will be better than life is today.

The generous outpouring of American support for tsunami victims in South Asia is a credit to our nation, but it doesn't make up for our neglect of many other regions. That neglect has serious implications for our security in the post-9/11 world. The US is in a long-term fight against a radical ideological movement in the Islamic world, yet our policy toward many struggling Muslim nations is either shortsighted, underfunded, or both. From Somalia, where we have no policy at all, to Tanzania, where we have no ambassador (despite the fact that terrorists attacked our embassy there in 1998), the US is not rising to the policy challenge. Our indifference can create a vacuum that others — whose interests may clash with our own — can easily fill.

I suspect that Mali hopes to get some much-needed assistance from Iran. Saudi money is funding the establishment of extremist schools and mosques around the world. With a different agenda, the Chinese government is offering the kind of tangible support across Africa that creates goodwill and longstanding relationships, building roads and soccer stadiums, making long-term loans, and trying to secure access to African oil markets. Mali, a Muslim democracy and one of the poorest countries in

the world, has attracted more American interest than many of its neighbors, but our diplomats still struggle to find the resources to compete for hearts and minds there. Meanwhile, other forces quietly make their own long-term investments in the region.

Many of the Malians who lined the streets to welcome the Iranian president were children. The US needs a policy today that will turn these children into adults who view America as an ally, not an enemy; who will see Americans as partners, not competitors; and who reject international terrorism and those who support it.

In July 2001, just months before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 changed the way we think about security and the world, the CIA published the report "Long-Term Global Demographic Trends: Reshaping the Geopolitical Landscape." It highlights the importance of "youth bulges" in the populations of much of the developing world, and raises real questions about whether national economies will be able to generate jobs for these youths, and whether the increased expectations and aspirations of generations who see the same glitzy media images that bombard our own children will be met.

"The failure to adequately integrate large youth populations in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa is likely to perpetuate the cycle of political instability, ethnic wars, revolutions, and anti-regime activities that already affect many of these countries.... Increases in youth populations will aggravate problems with trade,

terrorism ... and crime," the report states.

This is a projection, not a prophecy. But if we want a less threatening future, we Americans need to get in the game, increase our diplomatic presence, listen to the people on the ground, and combine widespread, quick-impact development projects with long-term investments in fighting corruption and promoting the rule of law. This has to be done in Mali and across the developing world. Most of all, we need to stop thinking solely in terms of how the world will look next year, and start thinking about how it will look in 50 years.

**A**T HER confirmation hearing, Condoleezza Rice told the Foreign Relations Committee that when the Soviet Union collapsed, the US was "merely harvesting the good decisions" of "wise and farsighted statesmen" in the late 1940s.

It is time to plan again for a generational effort, to commit to a policy of engagement, and to plant a new crop of wisdom. The US must engage with Muslim communities, and offer tangible support to struggling nations.

Without that sustained, consistent effort, our talk of partnership in the fight against terrorism will be seen for what it is: an empty gesture, and an empty-handed one at that.

■ Russ Feingold is a Democratic senator from Wisconsin and ranking member of the Senate's Africa subcommittee.

**A senator's rude awakening on streets of Mali: throngs were cheering Iran, not America.**