

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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“Islam and the West: Searching for Common Ground”

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On that catastrophic day of September 11, 2001, I was acutely aware that the sole super-power of the world, the United States, which had the capacity to show the way to solving the global challenges that faced us, could be diverted in an endless war of revenge and anger. This event set the United States directly in confrontation with the world of Islam as it launched its “war on terror”. The complicated confrontation is bleeding the energies and resources of both civilizations. It is diverting the US from its greater mission of showing the way to solve the problems that face the planet and concerns every human on earth. Whether the US accepts the role as the moral leader for the twenty-first century willingly or not, the US is the sole super-power and leader.

Let us remind ourselves why a dialogue between the US and the Muslim world is important. Islam is a world civilization of 1.4 billion people, 57 states – one of which is nuclear for the time-being – and there are 7 million Muslims living in the United States. Neither the war on terror nor a serious tackling of the global crises facing us can be resolved unless the vast and highly significant world of Islam is brought into a mutually respectful partnership with the rest of the world—especially the United States.

As a Muslim scholar living in Washington, DC, I felt I had to do whatever little I could to create understanding between the two. I also knew that my extensive field experiences in charge of some of the most inaccessible areas of the Muslim world – such as South Waziristan Agency where Osama bin Laden is supposed to be

hiding – would be an added advantage for both sides. This urge took me on travels in the Muslim world to nine countries in the three major regions of the Muslim world – the Middle East, South Asia and Far East Asia from February to April, 2006. I was accompanied by a small but enthusiastic group of American research assistants. We were able to discuss these issues with a whole range of people from President Musharraf to prime ministers, princes, sheikhs, professors, and students. We visited mosques, madrassahs, university campuses and classrooms. The project was sponsored by three leading institutions in Washington DC – American University, the Brookings Institution, and the Pew Forum.

BAD NEWS:

Throughout the travels we encountered very high levels of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. I have never encountered such intensity of emotion. The Muslim world in the years of the Cold War, when the United States was so obviously the moral power, admired and respected the United States. Today, we found that many Muslims do not see the US as the moral power it once used to be; in fact, many of the people we surveyed throughout the nine countries said that they would prefer Saddam Hussein, the most ruthless and vile of dictators, to the Americans in Iraq. In Turkey, the most popular film ever made called “Valley of the Wolves: Iraq” was in theatres when we were there. It is crudely anti-American and it shows a group of “Rambo” Turkish soldiers fighting against the “evil” United States soldiers. Even in the moderate country of Indonesia, the number one role model for young

Indonesians is Osama bin Laden – who is now widely called “Sheikh” as a mark of religious respect. The Muslim world focuses on action rather than rhetoric and right now they are seeing cold-blooded rapes in Iraq by US soldiers, the encouragement of torture, and they feel they are not seeing the ideals of the United States of democracy, human rights, and acceptance of diversity that it once so proudly and clearly stood for. One affluent woman who used to live in the US even told my team that she was “scared” to bring her grandchildren to the United States now because of the way they treat Muslims. That is the bad news.

Furthermore, there is a widespread perception in the Muslim world that Islam is under attack from the United States and the West. As we saw with the Danish cartoon controversy and the desecration of the Quran, Muslims all over the world are very passionate about their religion and their Prophet. It is a culture with high reverence for and sensitivity to these religious symbols and traditions.

There is a struggle within Islam which has been in play for centuries but is now erupting, between the more literalist interpreters of Islam and the more receptive and mystic forms. Right now, the warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, perceived attacks on Islam, and insensitivity to culture are all reinforcing the strong, literalist, interpretations of Islam. More outward signs of orthodoxy are spreading throughout the Muslim world, even to Indonesia. The greater the perception that Islam is under attack, then, the greater the support for those Muslims who stand up as champions of Islam. There is clearly cause and effect here.

I am referring to anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism but we need to keep in mind Islamophobia which means a hatred of Islam and prejudice against Muslims. Although they are different to each other, I suggest we need to understand their impact on each other. Islamophobia after 9/11 has gained momentum. The reason is obvious: the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were all Muslim. Some of the most wanted people in the world like Osama bin Laden are Muslim. People too readily equated all Muslims to terrorists and extremists. The result of this Islamophobia has been attacks on Islam and on Muslims. Muslims find that there is little hope of getting justice in this climate and are sometimes pushed towards acts of violence. I do not wish to condone these acts by any means and have condemned them, but I want to put the discussion in some context.

GOOD NEWS:

But there is good news. This ignorance and hatred can be challenged and can change. Just as Muslims are sensitive to “attacks” on Islam, Muslims are also very receptive to the positive messages from within Islam. I encourage all of the Senators and American people to learn about Islam and find the common bonds between the two civilizations.

Indeed, American values of equality, justice, knowledge, and compassion (as seen in the respect for human rights) are shared explicitly with Islam. Remind the leaders and the people there of these common values without giving a lecture –

remind them of this especially in their own context as well. Beheadings and suicide bombings are not part of Islam—remind them of that and that two of the greatest attributes of God in Islam are the “merciful” and the “compassionate”. Speaking about the common values shared by the Founding Fathers of the United States and the ideals of Islam will make a powerful and long-lasting impact on the hearts and minds of Muslims.

Furthermore, Muslims, Christians and Jews share deep bonds between them. Muslims are asked in the Quran to recognize the Jews and the Christians as “people of the book” and they hold a special place in our theology. A common figure who inspires us and who we share as a common patriarch and ancestor is Abraham. As for the love of Jesus in Islam, I urge you to read the “Jesus Poems” of Rumi who is such a popular poet in the United States. The notions of an omnipotent, universal God, the Ten Commandments, many of the central values are shared by the religions. Political and historical events have divided us, but examples of peaceful coexistence between the three religions can also be seen in history and contemporary society.

I also used this idea to encourage understanding during my travels. The first and most important steps were to encourage dialogue, understanding, and friendship. One of the ways I would deal with the anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism was to talk of the dialogues I am having and the friendships that have been created between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and give my own personal

example. I mentioned my friends like Jean and Steve Case, Doug and Ann Holladay, Bishop John and Karen Chane, Rabbi Bruce Lustig and his wife Amy, and Dr. Lachland Reed. In my travels and talks I mentioned these wonderful Americans who became my friends and who reached out to me after 9/11 seeing a lonely stranger in their midst.

I mentioned how I am personally inspired by the example of my friend Judea Pearl who lost his only son Danny Pearl in a brutal, savage and senseless killing in Karachi. Having got to know him as a friend over the years, because of our dialogues conducted nationally and internationally in promoting Jewish Muslim understanding, I have seen the heroic transformation of a personal tragedy into building a bridge to reach out and understand the very civilization that produced the killers who took his son's life. I would point out that these friendships have also helped to transform the relationship between Muslims, Jews, and Christians in the United States.

Please keep the context in mind: I was quoting these names in a mosque in Damascus where I was asked to deliver the post-sermon talk on a Friday, in madrassahs in Deoband and Delhi, and in speeches in Islamabad as well as the Royal Institute in Amman.

I would finally ask my team of young Americans to speak and I would introduce them as the best ambassadors we have between the US and the Muslim

world as intrepid Americans who represented the best ideals of America (for commentary on our travels see Beliefnet.com for articles by Dilshad Ali and the young Americans who accompanied me, Hailey Woldt and Jonathan Hayden).

As a professor on campus, I would recommend essential reading to Muslims during our travels and now to you all to help us understand each other: the first book is by my friend Dr. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, and it is called *The Dignity of Difference*. It is a powerful plea for Abrahamic understanding in the age of globalization. The second book I would like to recommend is also by a friend, Karen Armstrong, and her book is *The Battle for God*. In this book Karen illustrates how the three different faiths Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are all going through a period of intense internal debate in which what she calls the “fundamentalists” who are in opposition to the more “moderate” or “liberal” versions of faith. The third is my own book *Islam Under Siege* which argues that we are living in a world in which societies are all feeling under siege. When societies are under siege they tend to be defensive and there is little scope for wisdom and compassion.

Essentially, I have one recommendation, one that can easily be dismissed as too idealistic, but that is the only way to making a lasting peace for the US and the Muslim world: it is to create friendships across religion, race and tradition. I have discovered that once friendship develops then everything can change. Without these friendships, dialogue itself remains a restricted exchange of ideas and leads to little

else. This suggestion may be unlikely, but without genuine friendships forming we cannot expect any major changes in how we are dealing with the political situations on the ground. Take the example of the Palestinians and the Israelis. Too often the two view each other as enemies and are not prepared to concede anything except in terms of an advantage to themselves. The result is that even if there are concessions there are seen to be a result of bitter negotiations which continue to leave acrimony on both sides. But if both parties are able to create friendships and then meet as friends the situation will be very different and the peace process itself may take on a new momentum and a new meaning.

In conclusion, this will not be easy, but the exercise to understand the Muslim world is not a luxury for the United States: it is an imperative. It is the first step to confronting the looming series of world crises, and as you on the panel are those who this great nation looks to for wisdom and guidance, I plead with you to set aside the partisan and parochial issues to focus on the challenges of providing justice, compassion and friendship in this dangerous, uncertain, and violent time.