



Policy Forum Report

March 23, 2011

Background

On March 23, 2011, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened the first in a series of private, off-the-record Policy Forums bringing key young leaders from the Washington policymaking community together with selected representatives of the American Muslim community to engage in focused discussions of current issues bearing on US relations with the Muslim world.

The objectives of the Forum are three-fold: (1) to inform US foreign policy and public diplomacy with a more nuanced understanding of Islam; (2) to build bridges between US policymakers and Muslim leaders, groups, and institutions, both at home and overseas; and (3) to provide a platform for an ongoing frank exchange of views between American Muslims and USG policymakers.

Attendees from the House, Senate, and Executive Branch of the US Government and various institutions within the American Muslim community participated in the discussion as individuals, rather than as representatives of their offices.

The topic of this first Forum was the future of democracy in the Muslim world, exploring Turkey as a possible model for future developments and Tunisia as the Arab state which comes closest to the Turkish model. The following ideas were put forth during the discussions.

Turkey as a Model for a ‘Muslim’ Democracy and its Role as an Emerging Leader

A fairly young democracy (1923), Turkey can be looked to as a model for both democracy in a Muslim-majority society and how such a society can engage with its non-Muslim members and with secularism. Long seen as a “Western-style” democracy in many respects, recently Turkey has begun to embrace other elements of its society beyond the “Westernized” elite. While this has created anxiety for some within the US government (USG), it should not necessarily be seen as a negative—rather, it is an indication that Turkish society is becoming more inclusive (while there is still progress to be made in areas like freedom of speech).

Far from seeking to cause problems for the West, Turkey values its role as a bridge between the East and the West—from mediating differences between Syria and Israel to intercepting Iranian planes carrying arms, to securing the release of journalists held captive by Gadhafi. Some of these efforts have not been discussed publicly for fear that it could hinder Turkey’s ability to play similar roles in the future.

What Happens at Home Has Impact Abroad— and Vice Versa

If the American public sees issues as “black and white”, their representatives in Congress are likely to as well; and views expressed domestically have resonance abroad, for good or ill. For example, there has been a heated backlash in Turkey to Congressional resolutions on issues like the Armenian genocide, to the point where Turks associate America with this “insult” to their identity and little else. Governments like Turkey’s should educate their own people regarding the role of such resolutions in domestic American politics in order for them to understand what is significant and what is not, lest the tail start wagging the dog.

At the same time, the USG should also work to educate the American public at the grassroots level on issues that affect US-Muslim relations abroad. Efforts by selected organizations to bring together Turkish-American and Armenian-American communities, for example, can have a positive impact on US-Turkish relations at the international level. Domestic developments such as the recent hearings on radicalization within the American Muslim community and resolutions adopted in some US cities against sharia law all have impact on US relations with Muslim societies abroad as well as with American Muslims at home. The extent to which American Muslims are perceived by others to be either persecuted or marginalized, plays directly into the hands of terrorists in their ability to recruit others to their cause. Although controversial in some respects, the radicalization hearings were actually helpful to the degree that they helped educate the American public on the constructive role played by American Muslims in uncovering plots and assisting law enforcement officials. In other words, the ability of the United States to “win the hearts and minds” of Muslim communities abroad depends, in part, on the hearts and minds of the American public and the treatment of its Muslim members.

Another area in which greater education of the American public can be helpful is in the clarification of potentially explosive linguistic terms. “Sharia”, for example—associated in the minds of many Americans with the Taliban and the severing of hands—simply means “rule of law.” Many Muslims today are engaged in an internal discussion about what kind of rule of law this means, and the ways in which it allows for new interpretations in light of developments over the past 1400 years. “Allah” is not a Muslim term but an Arabic word for God used by Arab Christians and Muslims alike. “Madrasa” simply means school, whether a public school as in many Arab countries or a private religious school as in Pakistan (where ICRD has been engaging madrasa leaders in educational enhancement and tolerance-building initiatives for the past seven years). Sometimes

such terms are purposely misused by those with an agenda to promote division; thus, education to develop greater understanding in these areas is critical.

Democracy: Changing the Reality—Not Just the Image—of US-Muslim World Relations

The American Muslim community can be a powerful bridge between America and the Muslim world. In seeking to address the gulf of misunderstanding that exists between the United States and the Muslim world, one American Muslim-run organization has sought to improve the image of both America and the Muslim world in the eyes of the other by improving the on-the-ground reality through promotion of democracy. Most Americans judge Islam by what they see happening in the Muslim world. Thus, to improve the image of Islam in America, it will be necessary to improve the substandard governance and economic deprivation that plagues many Muslim countries—and for this, authentic democratic development will be crucial. Similarly, the image of America in Muslim communities abroad is unlikely to improve without a meaningful change in US support for Muslim dictators.

Who are the Islamists and who speaks for Islamism

For too long, false dichotomies of “Islam vs. democracy” or “Islamic state vs. secular state” have created obstacles to understanding the relationship between Islam and democracy. Turkey provides a positive model for how a “secular” democracy need not be against either religion or Islam. In short, a society can have both a secular government and an instilled respect for religion and the values of the people. The recent revolutions in the Middle East show there is also no Arab “exception” to democratic values. Arabs—both those more religious and those who are less so—have been willing to die for their freedoms, echoing the “Give me liberty or give me death” of America’s own revolutionary experience.

It was suggested that one of our bigger foreign policy mistakes has been the tendency to “lump all Islamists together.” There are “mainstream” and “extreme” Islamists, and today most Islamists oppose violence and terrorism and simply want a say, like any other constituency, in how their society is governed. More and more Islamists seem to be embracing Turkey as a positive model and rejecting the Iranian model of a state governed by religious clergy, believing that religion must come from within the believer, not from government dictate. This is why many Islamists have participated in the recent democratic revolutions across the Middle East. To ask who speaks for the Islamists is as far-reaching a task as to ask who speaks for the American people—the voices are many and diverse, and true democracy provides opportunity for all to be heard.

An improved understanding of the diversity within Islamist movements and even within specific Islamist organizations will be essential to crafting an effective foreign policy in the wake of the current upheavals in the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood’s participation in the Egyptian Revolution, for example, has raised concerns both in the media and within Congress. Indeed, former President Mubarak continuously used fear of the Brotherhood to dissuade the United States from pushing harder for democracy in Egypt. Yet there are numerous schools of thought within both the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole and within its local chapters in each country. (Recently ICRD engaged ten leaders of the Brotherhood in Jordan in an effort to promote reconciliation between the Brotherhood and American Evangelicals. The impact was so positive that the Brotherhood asked if the next program could be expanded to include representation from MB chapters in Egypt, Yemen, Kuwait, and Morocco as well.

The “scare tactics” used by Middle Eastern dictators to persuade Western powers to go easy in pushing for democracy have now been largely discredited by the recent revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. These peaceful revolutions have demonstrated an alternative to militarism, which has thus far been effective in overthrowing oppression and enabling the voices of the people to be heard.

Tunisia—Prospects for Democracy, Outlook for US Relations

With a small and homogeneous population and a fairly advanced economy and education level (thus resembling Turkey), Tunisia in many ways represents the best-case scenario for democracy in an Arab state. If democracy cannot succeed there, it is unlikely to succeed elsewhere in the region.

One of the biggest issues now facing the country, which has a powerful but moderate Islamist movement, is the role of religion in politics. How this issue is addressed in Tunisia will likely have an impact on how it is addressed in other Muslim countries that are currently experiencing political upheaval. However, as is true elsewhere, democracy can take many forms.

The current revolutions have had and will continue to have an impact on how America is perceived in the Muslim world. An American Muslim leader who recently returned from an extended stay in Tunisia reported that the Tunisian people are aware that America played a positive role during the overthrow of President Ben Ali. In both Tunisia and Egypt, the populations had assumed the United States would support the dictators. By playing a role in convincing those armies not to shoot peaceful protestors and by advocating a peaceful relinquishment of power, the United States effectively placed itself on “the right side of history.” US diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks two months before the Tunisian Revolution, which revealed the degree to which the United States had been pushing for democracy and freedom in both Tunisia and Egypt, played a powerful role in persuading Tunisians that their government did not really have the support of the United States.

Thus, the Arab revolutions and the US responses are changing the way the United States is viewed in the Arab world. While President Obama has been criticized in some circles for not following up on his Cairo speech with greater action, some feel the mere fact that he made this speech—at a university, directed toward youth—has inspired change, as many of the same students who listened to his speech also led the revolution. The revolutions will also impact how Americans view the Muslim world—instead of viewing Muslims in the Middle East predominantly through the lens of terrorism, Americans now see Arabs and Muslims fighting for the same rights that Americans hold dear.

Looking Toward the Future

On both sides of the ocean, US-Muslim world relations are often understood by looking to the past and assuming that history will repeat itself. Much has changed, however, that will require a wider lens to understand. Young people, who form the majority in many Muslim countries and who are more tech-savvy and questioning of past practice than their forebearers will play a major role in determining the future of the U.S.-Arab relationship. With the growing use of the internet, Facebook, and other social media, governments are no longer able to control access to information, and young people are becoming less willing to accept oppression.

To be sure, fledgling democracies emerging in some Muslim countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan are still lacking in many respects (in the case of Pakistan, not least because of its feudal nature). As each country has its own unique history, culture, and constantly-changing circumstances, there can be no “cookie cutter” approach to building democracy in Islam. However, the basic principles of democracy—e.g. government by the people and for the people;

accountability; freedom of expression, organization, and religion; and protection of human rights—remain the same.

Conclusion

The Forum concluded with a discussion on how the participants can become resources for one another by providing reliable information when needed. Possible topics for future forums were also discussed such as foreign aid; current developments in Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain; and the Muslim Brotherhood in addition to other Islamist movements.

*The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO which addresses identity-based conflicts that escape the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government in advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief reflect diverse opinions expressed during the Forum and may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.