

The Stanley  
Foundation



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## The United States and the Muslim World: Critical Issues and Opportunities for Change

In 2004, US relations with the Muslim world reached a low point. To many Muslims, the war in Iraq and the conflation of Iraqi regime change with the “war on terror” seemed a bid to deepen US control over geostrategic regions and energy resources. Other US policies also generated popular hostility: violations of human rights and international law in the treatment of prisoners of war in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, tacit approval of Israel’s policies regarding the Palestinian Authority, and US visa restrictions. Taken together, these actions fostered a perception that the United States was engaged in a war against Islam, despite formal pronouncements to the contrary.

At the same time, however, declarations of US support for democratization generated hopes and expectations for political reform in much of the Muslim world. Longstanding cooperation with authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, came under increasing criticism. With the revelation that Saddam Hussein had lacked weapons of mass destruction, the Bush administration increasingly argued that the establishment of democracy in Iraq would facilitate its emergence in other countries of the region. Democratic governance throughout the region, it was argued, would effectively undermine the terrorist threat posed to the United States by radical, transnational

Islamic organizations such as Al Qaeda. The assumption that Iraq would set off a democratic ripple effect was, however, strained by realities in Iraq, where the ongoing insurgency undermined the provision of security and public services, hindered the building of state institutions, and reportedly provided a training ground for new radical groups and individuals.

Recognizing these challenges to US relations with the Muslim world, the Stanley Foundation convened a meeting January 15, 2005, outside of Atlanta, Georgia, that brought together policy experts from government, academia, and leading Muslim community organizations. The working group discussed an array of short-term, pragmatic recommendations and the need for long-term, consistent efforts to inform legislators, the media, opinion leaders, policymakers, and the broader public about the importance of the Muslim world to US national interests. Discussions focused around four themes:

1. Understanding terrorist threats and radical Islam.
2. Exercising US power constructively.
3. Rethinking the promotion of democracy.
4. Building new political coalitions within the United States to promote more constructive US-Muslim relations.

More information on the US-Muslim World Initiative is available online at [stanleyfoundation.org](http://stanleyfoundation.org).

This Policy Bulletin summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the rapporteur and program officer. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this bulletin. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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A confluence of events in early 2005 opened new opportunities for US policymakers and advocacy organizations to pursue these recommendations. The “orange revolution” in Ukraine, the Beirut street demonstrations and announced withdrawal of Syrian troops, the elections in Iraq and in the Palestinian Authority, and the planned Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip have combined to create space for new political initiatives that could improve US standing in the Muslim world. At the same time, the challenges and contradictions that have long plagued US policy toward parts of the Muslim world—the Middle East in particular—remain unchanged. Iraq continues to be an unstable situation from which it will be difficult to extricate US forces while still achieving the desired policy goals.

### **Political Islam and the Nature of Terrorist Threats**

A poor understanding of the range of Islamic organizations among the American public and US policymakers alike has led to a fundamental misunderstanding of the diversity of political Islam and its associated movements. There have also been missed opportunities for constructively engaging with a range of Muslim groups to promote democracy from within.

Facile classifications, such as the myth of a “totalitarian Islamic threat,” are unlikely to yield fruitful policies. Priority should be placed on helping policymakers understand key aspects of political Islam, including why some Islamist groups use violence. Key themes include stressing that:

- The United States is dealing with a transnational identity movement, not a

coherent organization with traditional command structures or a uniform ideology. These groups differ in their theological views and their conceptions of the Muslim role in the world. Many, however, feel a sense of urgency in confronting what they see as American “imperial” designs.

- While the US government frames the problems of the Muslim world as one of freedom versus tyranny, many in the Muslim world relate to Islamist perspectives that portray their struggles in terms of the powerful and greedy against the weak and poor. US disregard for this classic populist appeal at the core of much of the Islamist message, and the importance of socioeconomic issues more generally, means that the ideological appeal and the capacity for popular mobilization of many Islamic movements and organizations is only dimly perceived.
- A common denominator in most of these movements is the desire to get their own regimes to live up to the principles of Islam, though they differ on how to achieve this goal—either through violence or participation. Relatively few Islamist organizations in the Muslim world are violent, and reaching out to Muslim opposition groups advocating reform within authoritarian regimes will be essential to realizing US aspirations to bring democracy to the Middle East.
- In sum, there are diverse grievances driving political Islam and Islamist movements that vary by region and by conflict. These differences are often masked by common populist and religious rhetorics. The notion of a

totalitarian Islamic threat is both inaccurate and dangerous in the kinds of policy prescriptions it produces.

## Make the Most of US Superpower Status

Because the consequences of US action abroad are magnified thanks to its superpower status, participants considered how US strength might be more constructively deployed around the world. There is still a significant reservoir of good feeling toward the United States in the Muslim world, and a few well-thought-out corrective measures could go a long way in rebuilding the American image.

Perhaps the most important step is to reaffirm American commitments to human rights and civil liberties at home. One of the United States' greatest strengths, historically, has been the ability to inspire others through key values and democratic practices. But the narrative of liberal democracy does not project well when the civil rights of Muslims are threatened or fundamental human rights are violated. To regain its credibility abroad, the United States should assert the primacy of human rights and reaffirm the importance of international law. It is also essential to reopen US society to the world by relaxing visa restrictions, reviving educational and cultural exchanges, and backing these exchanges with significant funds. Ensuring that future Muslim leaders enjoy access to the unparalleled educational opportunities found in the United States is one way in which to immediately revive these connections.

The projection of American power in the Muslim world should also be consonant with broader notions of the common

good for Muslim regions and societies. Instead of continuing the “you are for or against us” approach toward Muslim countries in the war on terrorism, policymakers should enlist potential Muslim allies in the war on terror by focusing on shared benefits that could accomplish the same goals.

## Rethink Existing Democracy Promotion Efforts

Democracy has become the watchword of efforts to reshape the Middle East in particular. But too often, as one participant noted, “democracy appears to many as a punishment inflicted on our enemies, but never a gift delivered to our friends.” Despite its best intentions, externally driven social engineering generally does not produce the desired outcomes and is almost invariably accompanied by an array of unintended negative consequences.

The US policy of promoting democracy in order to eliminate terrorist threats is based loosely on “democratic peace theory,” which promulgates the notion that democracies do not go to war with other democracies. It is unlikely, however, that the spread of formal democracy will bring peace to the Middle East, as the administration anticipates, in the short and medium run. First, Al Qaeda and similar radically violent organizations are transnational in both origin and in conduct, not confined to a set of rogue states or authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, democratization alone cannot substitute for solving problems that are at the root of much of the region's instability. These include the land-for-peace process undertaken to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the development of viable national economies.

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US democracy promotion initiatives in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world can be made more effective and more credible by undertaking the following measures:

- Lessen the link between the promotion of democracy and its imposition by unilateral force and occupation. The United States should consistently support ending occupations through negotiation, adherence to international law, and the principle of self-rule. This should be as true for Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority as for Syria in Lebanon.
- Replace the top-down utopian project of externally imposed democratization with a more contextually sensitive approach to economic and political liberalization that does not uphold electoral competition as the sole litmus test, but as one aspect of emerging democratic polities.
- Develop contacts with a range of Islamist movements. Religiously based organizations played a significant role in the evolution of American democratic practices, and democratization only has staying power when there is a sense of “ownership” by key stakeholders. The practice of democracy must be perceived as congruent with national interests and with public values.
- Encourage and support contact with a wide range of civil society actors in the Muslim world. Such contacts not only benefit groups within the Muslim world but also bring a more nuanced, in-depth understanding of the region to US policymakers.

## Build New Political Networks Within the United States

The greatest potential for creating more positive US relations with the Muslim world may be right here at home. First, contacts between experts on the Muslim world and policymakers should be strengthened to educate and raise awareness about key issues. US national interests have not been well served by the marginalization of substantive expertise on the Arab world, for instance, in the making of US foreign policy.

This may well happen, however, only when Muslim domestic constituencies become politically organized and systematically engaged. Congressional voting and legislation have traditionally reflected the concerns of a relatively small number of interest groups. Legislators concerned with foreign policy may face considerable pressure from domestic constituencies focused on single issues, particular countries, or limited ideological agendas. American civil society is therefore a crucial arena of engagement for organizations interested in improving US relations with the Muslim world.

Effective groups typically have a comprehensive strategy for coordinating organizations and individuals which in turn have some influence with congressional representatives. Currently, with regard to the Muslim world, efforts are episodic and financially, strategically, and institutionally inadequate. In addition, Muslim communities in the United States are diverse and often divided in their foreign policy agendas.

A multipronged strategy to build civil society and improve connections to

policymakers would involve some of the following measures:

- Identify key people in the political process who are regular channels for legislators to identify constituent concerns—e.g., state and local party chairs, deans of law schools, journalism programs, social science professors, and deans of theological seminaries—and create networks between them and Muslim community groups.
- Nurture relationships between advocacy groups and policymakers. Policymakers often need help identifying civil society groups that are reliable, legitimate sources of information, while at the same time—through regular interaction with policymakers—community groups can develop a greater sense of efficacy by seeing that they have an opportunity to share their expertise and influence public policy.
- Build relationships between Muslim community organizations and policy experts. By speaking at Muslim community events, reviewing policy reports, and facilitating contacts with the policy world, policy experts help build a sense of common agendas and help citizens affirm that their efforts are not conducted in isolation. Their expertise might bolster the arguments of Muslim advocacy organizations who are just beginning to involve themselves in the political process.
- Increase the ranks of Muslims practicing in the fields of journalism, law, and public affairs, to make these fields more representative of the diversity of American society.
- Organize more educational and fact-finding trips to the Muslim world for legislators, congressional staffers, and outgoing public officials. Such trips have proven very effective at producing dramatic transformations in attitudes. Energy should be devoted to expanding these underfunded programs and generating resources for them within the US and the Muslim world. ■

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## The Stanley Foundation

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Consistent with its vision of a secure peace with freedom and justice, the foundation encourages public understanding, constructive dialogue, and cooperative action on critical international issues. Its work recognizes the essential roles of both the policy community and the broader public in building sustainable peace.

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