

**Building Bridges of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation between the US  
and the Islamic World  
November 7, 2002**

Participant experts: Dr. Shukri Abed, University of Maryland, College Park; Assistant Professor Jillian Schwedler, University of Maryland, College Park; Ambassador Tariq Karim

USAID participants: Mr. Joseph Duggan, Mr. Thomas Johnson

IRIS participants: Malcolm Russell-Einhorn, Gabriela Mossi, Nicola Mousset-Jones, Thierry van Bastelaer, Clare Wolfowitz, Chas Cadwell, Dennis Wood.

**Highlights**

**Dr. Shukri Abed**

- Islam is a comprehensive system of thought which attempts to address all aspects of life, including politics and science, and is very supportive of scientific progress and the pursuit of knowledge.
- Arabs are angry about 1) US policy, 2) Israel's treatment of Palestinians, 3) Arab leaders who stay for 40 years in power and bring no progress.
- Muslims live with a great feeling of hopelessness and humiliation which has led to violent reactions.
- Arabs wonder why the US supports undemocratic countries like Kuwait, when they are said to believe in democratic principles. It is perceived that this support is given selectively because it is convenient for US interests.
- Addressing difficult issues, such as education, improving the lives of those living in poverty, and improving lives of Palestinians, will help ease the violence.

**Dr. Jillian Schwedler**

- An obstacle to US development projects is the perception by Arabs of US's double standards- promoting democracy while supporting authoritarian regimes.
- If the US tries to change curriculum of madrassahs so that it is not religious-based, the response will be, "they just want to secularize us/impose their values on us".
- There is no inherent conflict between Islam and modernism, so the assumption should not be that Islam is incompatible with changes in the modern world.
- Programs addressing civil society should apply a broad definition such that Islamist and tribal groups, who are typically involved in providing infrastructure and services, are included.
- The most radical militants are found in countries with the most repressive regimes.
- The problems to be addressed by this new initiative are not cultural or ideological, but political.

**Amb. Tariq Karim**

- The vast majority of the Muslim world are impoverished, and the poor are the foot soldiers of terrorism. Leaders of terrorist groups are not only highly

- educated but are drawn, more often than not, from Islamic countries with long records of repression and no democracy.
- Islamic women are excluded from participating in society, despite being the ones who can influence their children. Children are vulnerable to being swept into terrorist groups.
- Madrassahs attract people by providing social services and can be tools for drafting young people into radical groups.
- New ways must be found to provide alternative educational choices to madrassahs.
- Bangladesh was transformed as a society when women began to participate in the economy and became politically active.
- Aid has not reached its intended audience as seen in Bangladesh, where only 25% of the aid given reached the intended people. Despite the ineptitude of successive governments, this small amount did succeed in transforming the country..
- The building blocks of transforming societies are 1) education at every level starting at the bottom (primary level) first, 2) civic education, community management and health service, 3) technical assistance for income and employment generation schemes, 4) vocational training and assistance for developing self-employment opportunities, 5) development of SMEs and financial institutions which lend to them.
- New initiative should focus on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Libya, and Egypt.

#### **Other discussion**

- Reactions (both small and large) to a US attack on Iraq will be dispersed and found all over the globe, and governments will come under great pressure from domestic citizens.
- This initiative should work outside of regimes and build parallel structures from the bottom-up approach.
- Focus on discovering what incentives cause governments to change.

#### **Detailed Notes**

Dr. Abed explained that Islam is a comprehensive system of thought which attempts to address all aspects of life, including politics and science. The Quran is very supportive of scientific progress and the pursuit of knowledge. The rules that govern Islam are not rigid, but left to the wise men and women of each period to interpret. They can apply rules to current situations without conflict as long as they hold up to with the core values and ideas of Islam. Dr. Abed gave an example of the difference between Isjtihad and Jihad. Isjtihad means to exert effort to achieve a betterment of one's self and a betterment of life. But there has been a shift to interpret Jihad now in the worst and most extreme way. What are the political and social circumstances that bring people to use Jihad in its most negative meaning? Dr. Abed believes that Arabs are very angry about 1) US policy, 2) Israel's treatment of Palestinians, 3) Arab leaders who stay for 40 years in power and bring no progress. They ask how come their populations are experiencing so much poverty at a time when other regions, such as Latin America, have greatly improved their standard of life. Why are they without true democracy in the Arabic world? Latin America has been able to move toward democracy, but movement in many Muslim countries toward democracy has been stymied. These questions are on the mind of all Arabs. But,

despite even these questions, what pushes some of them to violence? What pushed Muslims to go beyond the ideological to violence? No Moslem is happy with the present world, but there is a great feeling of hopelessness. No one can find a way out—e.g., Palestine. And, the regimes in the Arab world, which continue to contribute to this hopelessness, are supported by the US when it chooses to do so. Islamic societies need to move to a better life, but how? What can we "Americans" do to diffuse the anger, treat the symptoms and address the causes?

Dr. Abed continued that if Iraq is attacked, it will have a major impact on the psyche of the Arab world. There will be a great deal of destruction, all observed by Muslims around the world. Iraq is viewed as a great civilization. Baghdad used to be called the City of Peace. If Baghdad is attacked, Arabs will look at it as a battle against the Muslim world for oil and Israel. In his view the cause of this violence is the feeling of hopelessness on the part of the Arabs. The daily humiliation the Palestinians face just going through crossing check points contributes to their sense of hopelessness. They believe that there are no other options left to them but violence and force. Israel has treated Arabs badly, but so have their own regimes. Regimes of the Arab world have been cruel to their people. Arabs wonder why the US supports the likes of say, Kuwait, which is certainly not a flourishing democracy. This support, in their general perception is given selectively because it is convenient for US interests.

Dr. Abed believes that if we can try to address difficult issues, (education, improving the lives of those living in poverty, improving lives of Palestinians) it will help ease the violence. Arabs, like many people in the world, are seeking a better life, but the good life is experienced by only a few privileged societies such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Schwedler was asked to present her ideas next. She explained that the Arab world is only 15% of the Muslim world, and her comments pertain specifically to this group of Muslims. She believes that an obstacle to US development projects is the perception by Arabs of double standards. The perception of the US in the Muslim world is that US programs are not well intentioned and their foreign policy is hypocritical. Promoting democracy while supporting authoritarian regimes demonstrates that democracy is not the true objective of such programs. Clear examples are the US alliances with Jordan and Egypt but repudiation of Iraq, Iran, and Syria. All US programs, including USAID programs, will be viewed through this prism—i.e., seen as part of US values which are not consistent, embody a double standard, and are hypocritical. US support for certain regimes are part of this problem. All the issues before us today in relating to Islamic society pre-dated 9/11. We're just beginning to pay attention to them now. As to democracy itself, it is not as important in Islamic societies as other things.

Dr. Schwedler spoke about the example of Jordan. Jordan has enjoyed a relatively open press with 2 dozen newspapers, and yet recently the government introduced temporary laws that repress the freedom of speech. These new laws make it illegal to speak out against the US or Israel. To do so would be considered a violation of state security. These new laws curbing freedom of expression are draconian and numerous (there are 127 temporary laws addressing these kinds of issues). Yet, Jordan was one of our hopeful open democracies in the region. The events of 9-11 have given regimes an excuse to reverse freedoms. One of Jordan's female government officials was prosecuted for questioning insurance increases. She

questioned it because the insurance company was owned by government officials. She was tried and imprisoned without any response from the US.

Dr. Schwedler addressed the idea of the US trying to reform the curriculum of madrassahs. She believes that if the US tries to change curriculum so that it is not religious-based, the response will be, "they just want to secularize us/impose their values on us". It should be understood that there is no inherent conflict between Islam and modernism. Political Islamist Movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, are active in promoting education, even for women. They recognize that if people are illiterate they cannot read the Quran. Tribalism is also quite flexible and adjustable to changes of the time. So, it the assumption should not be that Islam is incompatible with changes in the modern world.

Dr. Schwedler spoke about civil society. When one defines civil society typically one looks for organizations such as trade or citizen groups. Using this definition, one does not find much civil society in the Arab world. **But if one thinks of civil society defined as ways in which individuals can address grievances and problems in society, then Islamist and tribal groups do provide this and should be considered civil society groups. They are, for example, involved in providing infrastructure and services when their governments fail to do so. Yet these groups are often cut out of the picture when initiatives are developed for strengthening civil society.** A key operational matter for an initiative is to identify the social capital that exists and to figure out how to use it in implementing the program.

A participant asked Dr. Schwedler to explain the difference between a "Muslim group" and an "Islamist groups". Dr. Schwedler said that Muslim groups are made up of anyone in the Muslim community, while Islamist groups have a political agenda. Both moderate and radical Islamist groups exist: moderates try to work within the government system for change, while radicals want to overturn the government regime. Radicals make up a small portion (10%) of Islamist groups. Where one finds the most radical militants is in countries with the most repressive regimes. For example, when Egypt made agreements with Israel, the reaction of extremists was to kill Anwar Sadat. However in Jordan, which has historically had a less repressive regime, the same type of agreements with Israel was not met with violence.

A participant asked what then was driving the new laws in Jordan which have rolled back particular freedoms (freedom of speech) recently. Dr. Schwedler believes it is a combination of factors. First, Jordan's new king is less popular among Jordanians than the previous king, so there is internal uncertainty. The other factor is Jordan's previous relationship to Israel and Iraq. Jordan remained neutral in the gulf war, but by so doing saw the US cut aid to Jordan. The government decided therefore that it is in their interest to keep the US content (rather than risk losing aid) and so the regime suppresses any protests against the US. It is the need for both internal stability and US alliance that can explain the repression of people and specifically repression of reformers by the government. A participant asked how to define a repressive regime. The definition provided was a government not moving towards democratic freedom.

Another question was posed by a participant on how tribes function as part of civil society. Dr. Schwedler stated that Islamist groups tend to be anti-tribal and this is because Islamists want to achieve an egalitarian society, and they view tribes as

inherently opposed to this value. So there can be conflicts between those who are Islamists and those who are "tribalists". But there are many cases where the two groups exist simultaneously and without conflict. In fact, people can be members and hold positions in both tribal and Islamist groups, and this is not viewed as problematic. The final point of Dr. Schwedler's presentation was that the problems a new initiative needs to address are not cultural or ideological, but political.

Following Dr. Schwedler, Amb. Karim gave a power point presentation.<sup>1</sup> International initiatives have tended to deal with the elite, secular class who tell the US what they want to hear. Demographics of the world's Muslim population show that the vast majority is impoverished, and the poor are the foot soldiers of terrorism, although the leadership of terrorist groups are not only highly educated but are drawn, more often than not, from Islamic countries with long records of repression and no democracy. Islamic women are excluded from participating in society, despite being the ones who can influence their children. Children are vulnerable to being swept into terrorist groups.

How to reach the children? Madrassahs can be tools for drafting young people into radical groups. They usually begin as charities providing social services to attract people and then the "bonding begins". They are on their way to social mobilization. Despite the influential power of madrassahs, we cannot (and should not) try secularize them, but instead must seek ways to marginalize them. There was an objection to the word "marginalize" and discussion about the impossibility of marginalizing madrassahs as long as poverty exists, because madrassahs are the institutions providing the social net for the poor when government fails. Amb. Karim clarified that he meant to encourage finding ways to provide an alternative to madrassahs, and therefore to make people less dependent on madrassahs. He cited examples from Bangladesh. Bangladesh was transformed as a society when women began to participate in the economy. This resulted not only in their coming into the economic and societal mainstream, but also caused a political transformation- voter turnout was higher than ever after women became politically active. In 1991, voter turnout was 70%. By 2001 it had increased to 76%. For these same years, the percentage of women's participation increased progressively from less than 50% to 56% of the total votes cast. In Bangladesh, NGOs started offering better services (adult education, family planning) the madrassahs so that kids were sent to the NGO school that was run along side the madrassahs and public school educational options. This caused madrassahs to change in order to compete and to add things to their religious teaching. For example, madrassahs have started teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. The government now offers secular training to teachers of madrassahs, and recently has also embarked on a program of secular training of Imams of mosques.

A participant asked whether the impetus was "market" competition. Amb. Karim explained that it happened unintentionally when after Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, 10 million refugees who had fled the fighting in Bangladesh into India started returning to Bangladesh. The government was unable to provide adequate services, so NGOs began to provide social services and did such a good job at it such that they set the benchmark for madrasses and the government to compete with them. This eventually also set high performance standards for madrassahs. So the raised standards changed the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for full slide presentation.

Dr. Abed suggested that leaving educational institutions to compete may not be effective in other societies. There is agreement that if efforts are targeted at trying to change madrassahs, the perception will be that we are trying to "westernize" them. The key would be finding ways to provide people with an alternative choice. The quest could be to find a model of de facto co-existences. An example in Israel was given where orthodox religious schools can organize and are regulated under the government, but they are entirely in charge of their own curriculum.

Amb. Karim continued that 80% of Muslims live in the "periphery" and are mostly rural and illiterate. To answer the question "what radicalized Islam?" Amb. Karim provided an historic explanation. According to Amb. Karim, the majority of people living in the periphery believed in Sufism, a "softer" version of Islam, very adaptive and flexible to change. Most of the Sufi saints who spread Islam had the roots of their "tariqahs" or ways in Iraq, and more specifically Baghdad, where the most revered Sufi Saint, Sheiokh Abdul Qadir Gilani, is buried. For a vast majority of the Muslims of South Asian, Central Asia and South East Asia, Baghdad probably ranks fourth, if not third, as the most hold place in Islam after Mecca and Medina. He explained that the genesis of the radicalization of Islam can be found in the cold war politics of 1982-1992 when 35 million Muslims in 42 different countries fought and had direct contact with Afghanistan and Pakistan, in an effort to fight Soviet forces. They became exposed to Deobandism, a radical form of Islam which introduced the concept of Jihad and removed women from society. The Diaspora of Muslims led to the spread of a more radical Islam. Today, the potential threat from radicals is widespread and its location cannot be predicted. For example, the backlash from the bombing in Bali, an island dominated by Hindus, occurred in India where Muslims were attacked by Hindus in retaliation. Other terrorist groups, IMU-Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, are underground now recruiting dissidents from all over central Asia, and who knows where they will target. Terrorism is now a global phenomenon.

Amb. Karim asked what should be done now. Should we send more aid when past programs were not successful? Amb. Karim explained that the two main reasons for their failure was that the intentions of US were (and remain to be) questioned because of the perception of "double-talk" (and the perception is not confined to Muslims in the Arab world only, but across the entire Muslim world). The US states that it supports democracy-building programs yet it is perceived as propping up repressive regimes. Second, the aid did not reach the intended audience. In Bangladesh, for example, according to a recent study done by an economic think tank, 75% of aid never reached the intended audience: and yet the 25% that did reach the people, transformed the country, despite ineptitude of successive governments. This was achieved because of a bottom-up approach, primarily driven by NGO activities. Amb. Karim pointed out that a lesson from the 20th century was that efforts to suppress religion did not work; therefore, efforts to suppress radical Islamist movements also will not work. Sanctions were also ineffective. The building blocks of transforming societies are 1) education at every level starting at the bottom (primary level) first, 2) civic education, community management and health service, 3) technical assistance for income and employment generation schemes, 4) vocational training and assistance for developing self-employment opportunities, 5) development of SMEs and financial institutions which lend to them. Out of these new institutions comes democracy, but it will be fueled from within. People will force

government to democratize, rather than view it as prescription being imposed from outside powers.

Amb. Karim's final point is where the new initiative should focus. He believes the focus should be on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Libya, and Egypt.

Dr. Wood pointed out that one conclusion from the discussion is that reactions (both small and large) to a US attack on Iraq will be dispersed and found all over the globe. Governments will come under great pressure from domestic citizens. Dr. Schwedler stated that this underlines the point that this is a political problem. Islam is seen by its followers as a liberating movement (anti-colonial, anti-communist, anti-western) so intervention will be viewed as confrontational.

A participant stated in reference to Amb. Karim's presentation that if this initiative is to be the "standard development agenda" as suggested in the presentation, whether the US goes into Iraq doesn't change anything. Amb. Karim responded that if the Islamic world, particularly the Islamic world of the "Asian Periphery of Islam, as distinguished from the Arab Core, perceives TV blitzes of US troops on the ground in Iraq, and visual images of "collateral damage", it would be difficult to predict how these audiences would react to such highly emotive images, which would in all likelihood be fueled in mosques. If US government subsidizes education, once that stops, nothing has changed. What will cause a change in the regimes such that they will begin to provide their people education? This proves that this is going to be a long process to bring real change.

Dr. Schwedler made the point that the perception in the Middle East is not that the US causes life to be miserable. Instead the view is that US supports regimes that make life miserable. So US programs are currently viewed with suspicion. Amb. Karim believes that US today is in a unique position to influence regimes, because it has no power that can challenge it. He said that now they have less choices of where to turn. They can no longer go to Russia for aid, but must work with US.

Mr. Thomas Johnson from USAID stated that if the US government is to go into countries and build parallel structures from the bottom-up approach, it would mean that they would bypass governments. Is this really an option? Amb. Karim said it will be difficult and there are definitely questions about whether NGOs can function within a highly regulated environment. In Bangladesh, the government wasn't paying attention until after NGOs were established. The government tried to crack down, but donors told them to leave NGOs alone.

From this discussion Dr. Wood concluded that **one important theme is "working outside of regimes" and discovering what incentives cause governments to change.** Amb. Karim does not think it is an either or scenario, but that definitely governments must be kept in line. Mr. Johnson stated that it still is very hard to exert this kind of pressure.

Dr. Wood asked how AID will work within the larger structure of the other US agencies doing things within this initiative. One participant believes that it is important to focus on the structure, such that we can compartmentalize the initiatives. For example, we should discover which civil society groups to work with. Mr. Johnson stated that AID wants to use different partners than those we have

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worked with in the past. AID has been told by other agencies that new initiatives are welcomed but they should stay out of the Middle East. Therefore, the focus will be on Pakistan, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, and Nigeria, and topically on freedom/justice, knowledge, and economic opportunity. Working with Japan will allow the US to "put a light footprint out there". Mr. Johnson was intrigued by the differences between Pakistan and Bangladesh and may want comparative research done on this topic.