Improved relations with the Muslim World:

How can the United States reach, help and enliven the silent majority in the Muslim World?

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May 14, 2003

The United States' relations with the Islamic world are not a new phenomenon. In fact, the United States has enjoyed, and still continues to enjoy, close relations of friendship and multi-faceted cooperation with the governments of a vast majority of Muslim countries throughout the world. Many of these relationships have been painstaking constructed and nurtured over the last five decades or more. The United States is a major donor of development assistance to many of these countries, and has considerable to robust trade with almost all. Pakistan is a major ally of the United States in the global war against terrorism, in which many other Muslim countries are also supportive in different ways. Many of the Muslim countries fought shoulder-to-shoulder as coalition partners with the United States in the war against Iraq in 1991 when Saddam Husain invaded Kuwait.

Why then are we talking about improving and reconstituting United States' relations with the Islamic world today? To my mind, a central puzzle that we are here to address today is: Why is it that while the United States continues to enjoy close relations of friendship with the governments of those Muslim countries that I have alluded to earlier, large numbers of peoples of those same countries and beyond, across the length and breath of the Muslim World, appear to be overtly hostile to the United States today?

Perceptions and discourse play very important roles in shaping societal attitudes towards various issues, and towards other peoples and actors in international society. Perceptions need not always be rational in basis. More often than not, they are shaped or constructed by emotive factors and fueled by discourse, which then become embedded in local folklore and beliefs over a period of time, through repetitive recitation and passing on from person to person, across generational bounds. So the various acts of terrorism, not least the heinous acts of 9/11, against the United States within the territory of the United States as well as US interests based abroad have served to impel many Americans to perceive the Islamic world in terms of certain stereotyped images. Similarly, certain actions of the United States at home and abroad have served to shape the perceptions of many in the Muslim world. The hostility that the United States perceives it faces from peoples across the Islamic world, to my mind, would seem to be driven by a number of ***perceptions*** which appear to have become deeply imbedded in the minds of people in Islamic societies – as distinguished from their respective rulers. Please note this last point as this is a very important distinction, highlighting a yawning gulf between rulers and peoples in those countries.

Why are we talking of a post-Iraq environment for reconstituting relations? Is it because these demonstrations of hostility are a post-Iraq phenomenon? I would say no:

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[1] The author delivered a talk based on this paper at the workshop on "Reconstituting the United States Relations with the Islamic World", jointly sponsored by the Office of International Programs and the IRIS Center, The University Maryland, with support from USAID, at the University of Maryland at College Park on May 14 2003.

this is not to be seen as a phenomenon that has sprung up suddenly, out of the blue, following the war on terrorism or the war against Iraq. But these two events, have served to sharply focus on, and bring to a welling-over of, a long simmering resentment that has been bubbling away under the surface, unnoticed or ignored. I will not dwell on the various acts of commission or omission that the United States is perceived to be guilty of that has aroused this apparent groundswell of resentment translating into outright hostility. More than enough of it has been written about and aired on the subject in recent months, here and abroad. The important thing is: these perceptions do exist, and they shape human behavior and attitudes of the peoples of those societies towards domestic and external events and issues. We cannot wish them away, nor will they fade away if we ignore them.

Generally, there is a tendency to focus on the Islamic world in terms of the Arab world and issues in the Middle East. But the perceptions that I have just talked about are not confined to the peoples in the Arab core of the Islamic world alone, but appear to be widely shared with an increasing degree of conviction among Muslim societies elsewhere in what I will describe as the vast periphery of the non-Arab Islamic world. Let us not forget that of the 1.2 billion Muslims who inhabit this world, only about 20% belong to the Arab World, while the rest of them reside in other continents. Close to 800 million Muslims inhabit the South, South East and Central Asian regions alone. These regions in the Asian continent together constitute a vast arc of potential instability, stemming from radicalized social mobilization of their Muslim populations by anti-American agenda spawned by the above combination of perceptions. These peoples, while sharing the faith founded by an Arab prophet, do not share the Arab culture or Arab perceptions on many other mundane issues. Yet the nature of the faith they share makes them believe in an "Ummah", an elastic community of citizenry spread along an elastic socio-political space that almost confers on whoever belongs to that faith a second citizenship of a non-temporal world. A Muslim is therefore constantly able to flit between his several layers of citizenship. He may be an Arab (along with his own nationality as derived from the state he belongs to), a Bangladeshi, an Indonesian, a Malaysian, a Pakistani, a Tajik or an Uzbek, and his domestic and world views are fashioned in that narrower nationalist crucible. But by virtue of his faith, he is also a citizen of this larger symbolic "space" that the Ummah provides, and therefore he may resonate emotively to a problem that is faced by a Palestinian, or an Arab, or a Bosnian, a Chechen or a Kashmiri, that is not his directly but to which he relates because of this elastic space. In this context, what the US does (or does not do) in one part of the Islamic world will resonate, and reverberate, in another part of and indeed across the entire Islamic world.

In today's globalized world, one may also say that the above phenomenon is accentuated further, even exacerbated in its development, by a globalization process that has increasingly rearranged the world order from a traditional pyramidical structure to a three-tiered structure of concentric circles, with all three circles cutting across national and regional boundaries[2]. In this context, 9/11 may be viewed as a point in time when all the different trajectories of the process in this new order intersected, with such horrendous and tragic consequences.

[2] "Globalization and the Postcolonial World", Ankie Hoogvelt; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

The problem is not a little exacerbated when one considers that the trajectory of hostility among many of these Muslim societies is equally, or initially, directed against their respective ruling establishments. This begs the question: Is there a relationship linking the domestic hostility against governments who are perceived as authoritarian, and have either totally abdicated their duties in governance or have failed in their responsibilities in delivering the public goods and services demanded of good governance by their respective populations, to their hostility towards the United States, notwithstanding their receiving considerably large amounts of multi-faceted assistance and political support from the United States?

However, do the people seen on the streets demonstrating against their respective governments and /or the United States constitute a majority, or are they only a small section while the majority remains silent on the sidelines? I would venture to say: the people out in the streets burning flags and effigies probably are only the tip of an iceberg, but that does not mean that the silent majority do not share some or all the opinions expressed by this over-vocal activists. They may empathize with or resonate emotively with some or all of the menu of grievances aired by the demonstrators in the streets, but like silent majorities in practically every other society in any other nation, they choose to shun from becoming proactively involved. Do the majority of the people of those countries support terrorism? I would respond: NO. Do they support dictatorial and brutal regimes like Saddam's. I would answer, NO. Are they all followers of the likes of Ossama bin Laden or Mullah Omar? Again I would say: NO. However, the people out on the streets come from the same society, and have familial or friendship linkages with the silent majority that does not come out on the streets. The ranks of the former are swelled, again, by more and more of that silent majority who hope for a middle way and a sane and peaceful resolution but are pushed over the edge to joining the ranks of the militant. It is therefore of critical importance that measures are taken to prevent such a process from multiplying further. To do that United States policies have to be geared fundamentally to addressing this vast constituency of silent people waiting, and watching, from the sidelines.

When governments abdicate from governance or fail to govern and neglect the needs of their peoples, they leave vast political spaces empty. This does not in any way reduce the demand for goods and services that a people expect from the social contract that they believe that they have with their governments. The empty spaces also do not remain vacant, because the laws of nature demand that they be filled in… and filled in they are, by non-state actors who may be sometimes be benevolent, but are often malevolent with their own political agenda as well.

What can, or must, the United States do now to roll back this wave of hostility and convincingly change the ***perceptions*** described above? For this we must ask, what level of analysis must it apply today in reassessing and reconstituting its relations with the Muslim world? Should it continue to take into account only governments and leaders, or should it also factor into the equation more directly the peoples of these countries and indigenous non-state actors and agencies interacting with those peoples.

A government's performance anywhere is judged by its success in delivering the public goods and services demanded by its people in a perceptibly satisfactory manner. If governments of impoverished Muslim countries prove incapable of utilizing foreign assistance efficiently, transparently and accounting for it satisfactorily, and failing to translate its use to societal improvement, then perhaps that assistance is best not routed through government agency but through indigenously promoted non-governmental agencies operating at local community levels, directing the assistance where it is most needed – in meeting the civic and economic needs of the people on the ground, with provision of basic services, education, healthcare and sanitation, and with jobs. We have to construct a strategy of starving the malevolent non-state actors meddling in the abandoned spaces in the body politic of these societies-- the impoverished and the disenfranchised people of those societies-- and offering them more attractive and benevolent alternatives. Such a strategy will enable market forces to operate in those spaces, motivating the silent majority to gravitate more to benevolent non-state actors and veering away from those with a malevolent agenda. The motives of the donor will then be interpreted through the good deeds and services on the ground delivered through such benevolent agencies which have local linkages and roots. At the same time, it will help those communities to develop their own capacities over a period of time, and also their own mechanisms and institutions of local self-governance and accountability. Democracy will then not be a bully pulpit "mantra" propounded by someone from a distant and foreign land, but a public good for which there is a growing public demand locally and domestically. It will ultimately force local leaders to acknowledge the voice for such demands, and to respond to those demands as well. We must remember that when we speak of freedom here, it is interpreted in those societies, down to their very lowest levels, as freedom from hunger, freedom from unemployment and constant want, freedom from the shackles of illiteracy and lack of access to education, freedom from disease, freedom form living in slums without potable drinking water, electricity, proper sanitation and the other essential needs that people in the industrialized societies take for granted.

So how do we achieve this? Do we recycle old wine in brand new bottles? Do we continue with doing business as usual? Do we continue thinking macro when what we need are a myriad of macro projects for developmental assistance? I would argue that one need not think of assistance in terms of billions, nor in terms of mega projects, but in smaller sums of amounts, channeled through local agencies along with technical assistance from the United States discreetly positioned, to help the community with their needs. The need for the United States having a "light footprint" cannot be emphasized enough – I recall a line from one of my favorite poems from Yeats in which he states :

> " I, being poor have only my dreams,
> I have spread my dreams under your feet,
> Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams "

The impoverished in many Islamic societies have only that – their dreams. The last thing the United States should be doing is to give them the impression that it is trampling on those dreams with its heavy boots on.

The help extended through supporting such activities need not, in fact should not, be provided for free, but some form of fees or charges, even nominal or in terms of services, should be levied so that the constituents for whom the project is devised become stake-holders in the project. Inculcating such a sense of ownership will lend incentive for ensuring efficiency, accountability and demanding transparency.

Any involvement in nation-building must be sustained over a long period of time, because societal transformations tend to be incremental, moving imperceptibly like glaciers. This will also require a strong and visible commitment of the political will. The pronouncements emanating from here at present largely appear just as that, mere pronouncements for political or geo-strategic reasons. In constructing a policy through a combination of elements sketched above, these pronouncements then turn into actions or deeds that are visible and that affect those people in their daily lives positively. Let us not forget, that the Quran, which for the Muslims is the recording of the Divine message of God revealed through the Prophet of Islam, repeatedly drives home the point that God will judge people in the hereafter by their actions in this world – a philosophy that is derived from its precursor religions and shared by those faiths as well. Although some, or many Muslims, themselves perhaps do not keep this injunction in mind in their own deeds and actions, they do not fail to apply this test to others. To meet those expectations, the United States needs to adopt a policy of long term involvement in on the ground development activities in the Islamic world that has a broad vision, is based on mutual respect, and is inclusionary, not exclusionary, in character.