

THE PLUSCARDEN PROGRAMME FOR THE
STUDY OF GLOBAL TERRORISM AND INTELLIGENCE
ST ANTONY'S COLLEGE

ST ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD OX2 6JF, UK · TEL: (01865) 274559 · FAX: (01865) 274559
EMAIL: pluscarden.programme@sant.ox.ac.uk

Countering Home-grown Terrorism
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**Engaging the Islamic World at Home and Abroad in Countering Home-Grown
Terrorism**
Emile A. Nakhleh, Ph.D.

The presentation consists of three parts: A discussion of global terrorism and of home-grown potential radicalization, especially in the United States; the on-going debate among Muslims between mainstreamers and radicals and the waning support for the radical paradigm; and the logic of engaging the Islamic world and the modalities and implications of engagement.

In last year's conference we focused on the rise of global terrorism and how to combat it. I recall addressing the issue of intelligence sharing with foreign intelligence liaison services – Muslim and non-Muslim – and the opportunities that could accrue from such collaboration and the challenges that liaison services could face in the process of sharing intelligence.

In this presentation I would like to focus on the larger Islamic community, both at home in Western countries, especially in the US, and in Muslim majority and Muslim minority countries. The key argument I would like to propose upfront is that engaging the Islamic world serves the national interests of the countries involved, including our own, gives credible mainstream Islamic activist organizations a stake in the future of their societies, and empowers the non-radicals to face down the narrow, intolerant worldview and offer a more inclusive vision as an alternative. An effective strategy of engagement also involves a partnership between the government in Muslim minority countries and the Muslim communities in these countries and requires that the strategic objective of this effort be clearly defined.

Introductory Remarks about Islamization and Political Islam

Political Islam and Islamization have gone through many important developments since the early 1990s. The Islamic "Awakening" or *sahwa* that appeared in Saudi Arabia during and following the first Gulf war ushered in Islamization of Muslim politics, resulting in threats to existing regimes, formation of Islamic political parties, and the spread of global radical jihad. The phenomenon of Islamization changed qualitatively and quantitatively after 9/11, with growing demands for economic, educational, political, and social reform in Muslim societies. Numerous Islamic political parties and movements became more engaged in the political process through elections; others rejected the process and opted for extremist ideologies and violence. Since the start of the Iraq war and the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime, Sunni-Shia sectarianism has reared its ugly head as well.

The radical paradigm, as enunciated by Usama Bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida, has underpinned global jihad and the opposition to Western power and influence and to moderate ideas of inclusion and participation. Many Muslims suffered heavily from the violence that was perpetrated by other Muslims in the name of Islam. Muslim thinkers, activists, and average citizens denounced the killing of

innocent civilians – Muslims and non-Muslims – and began to question the logic of violence that remains central to al-Qa’ida and radicalism. Shia Islam has become more resurgent, expressing itself in different forms: opposition to the West in general and the US in particular; resistance or *muqawama*; a more assertive Iran; and more active Shia proselytization or *tashayyu’* (Shiafication).

According to public opinion polls, more and more Muslims are rejecting the exclusivist, intolerant vision of Sunni radicals and are seeking a different trajectory for political Islam, according to media reports, academic studies, and numerous Islamic websites. Others have recast their opposition to Western hegemony and pro-Western authoritarian regimes by adopting a “resistance” or “*muqawama*” posture, hoping to acquire a new sense of national legitimacy and acceptance by their co-religionists.

Nature of the Debate

Religious ideology is driving Islamic politics at the state level in most Muslim states, but particularly in the greater Middle East. This ideology is embedded in an energized debate among Muslim activists and clerics on Islamic blogs and in the media, both print and electronic. The debate is focusing on the following:

- **First, which future vision of Islam the Muslim faithful should pursue.**
- **Second, the efficacy of participating in the political process through elections even under regimes that actively undermine the democratic process.**
- **Third, whether Islamic political parties ostensibly committed to the implementation of Sharia or Islamic law can equally have a long-term commitment to democracy and pluralism as the terms are understood in the West and other parts of the world.**

Questions have been raised by many observers, including mainstream Islamic thinkers, whether Islamic political parties’ commitment to democracy and gradual political reform is a short-term tactic to get to power or a long-term strategy to effect political change through the electoral process.

On the strategic level, Islamic political parties’ active engagement in the political process and tangible commitment to multiplicity of elections, pluralism, the rule of law, transparency in government, and minority rights will have long-term implications for Muslim regimes, the growth of democracy in Muslim lands, and of course for the United States, especially as the latter under the incoming administration will likely explore ways to engage mainstream Islamic activists, political parties, movements, and indigenous NGOs. How regimes, especially in the Middle East, will respond to Islamic participation in the electoral process will determine in the long-run whether Islamic activists will deepen their commitment to the process because of tangible benefits or whether they would reject the process viewing it as a sham and as another attempt by regimes to emasculate the opposition, Islamic and non-Islamic, in order to maintain their hold on power. If Islamic political parties reject the process because of regime behavior, democratization and political reform will likely be retarded and authoritarianism will become more entrenched.

For the United States, the democratic challenge in Muslim lands is equally critical. As the US begins to disengage from Iraq and adjust to a new role in the Islamic world and as we witness the rise of other major state actors, Washington’s willingness to engage pro-democracy Islamic parties will signal the extent of its commitment to democracy globally. The Islamic world will look to the incoming US administration to implement the rhetoric of democracy frequently cited by the US President in recent

years. The world will be watching how the new administration will choreograph its approach to democracy vis a vis both mainstream Islamic parties and authoritarian regimes. This is a tall order indeed, but one that cannot be ignored in the midst of great expectations of change which the international community is ascribing to the incoming administration.

It is important to note that the Islam-democracy debate is raging in the context of several important realities currently engulfing significant parts of the Muslim world. These realities include the following:

1. **Rising doubts about the efficacy of political participation by Islamic activists**, especially as regimes continue to restrict the electoral process.
2. **A growing support for a new brand of Salafi ideology in several parts of the Arab world – especially in countries struggling with youth bulges and weak economies including Yemen, Palestine, Pakistan, and Afghanistan – that is conservative, rigid, intolerant, and exclusive.** This ideology is being opposed by established Islamic parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood, HAMAS, Justice and Development in Morocco, Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait, AKP in Turkey, and PAS in Malaysia.
3. **A decreasing support for violent jihad because, among other things, of the killing of innocent civilians and a corresponding diminishing monopoly on the use of terror by al-Qa’ida, as the recent terrorism in Mumbai has demonstrated.** While Islamic activists increasingly move to “self-differentiate” and focus on local “bread and butter” issues instead of global jihad, the failure of Muslim regimes to repudiate the terrorism in Mumbai and other places forcefully and convincingly has led many non-Muslims to keep associating violence with Islam.
4. **Rising calls among some members of existing Islamic political parties to eschew politics and return to doing *da’wa* or proselytization;** such calls are being driven by disenchantment among these activists of the value of democracy and authoritarian regimes’ ability to thwart the process and manipulate it to their advantage.
5. **Increasing sectarian tensions between Shia and Sunnis** and growing Sunni vitriol against perceived Shia proselytization (*tashayyu’* or Shiafication) in Sunni communities.
6. **Growing demands by liberal Islamic thinkers for a secular approach to the political process and a rising interest among some to emulate the AKP experiment in Turkey.** These advocates are also calling for a 21st century Islamic political reformist ideology that encompasses democracy, women’s rights, nationalism, elections, minority rights, and pluralism.
7. **A weakened, even impotent, Arab world, an ascendant Iran, an assertive Israel, a divided Palestinian community, especially between Fatah and HAMAS, a dysfunctional Palestinian authority under President Abbas, a stalled peace process, a fragile political situation in Lebanon, a faltering US role in the region, and a new American administration.**
8. **Two on-going wars and violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, a resurgent Taliban, rising tensions in South Asia, and a continued terrorist threat in that region, including over Kashmir, and elsewhere.**

9. **Expanding role of Muslims in non-Muslim societies, especially in Western democracies and the challenge Islamic activists are facing in reconciling their desire to live by Sharia under Western secular laws and practices.** As they become more active citizens, some Muslim thinkers in Western countries are beginning to pursue a new kind of reasoning or *ijtihad* that would govern their religious minority status.

10. **Expanding use by Islamic activists of the new electronic media and televangelism. Radical jihadists no longer have a monopoly on such media;** in fact, the Internet, websites, and jihadist blogs have given way to Facebook, twitter, and text messaging which relatively affluent Muslim youth are actively using to share their ideas about music (“young women rock in Riyadh”), social interaction, and youth-related issues and concerns.

Key Issues and Questions in the Debate

Recent media articles and opinion editorials underscore the depth, intensity, complexity, and diversity of the debate that is sweeping the Islamic world. Some of the topics analyzed in these articles include the rise of organized Islamic movements, ideologies and tactics of Islamic activists, Islam and progressive thought, impotence of the Arab state system, Qaradawi’s attacks on the Shia, Islamic politics and social justice, and the Mumbai attacks and the changing face of terrorism.

Some modernist Islamic thinkers now argue that since traditional Western secular nationalist ideologies have failed in Arab Muslim countries, the only way forward is to combine secular notions of governance and Islam in a pragmatic arrangement that would allow for the co-existence of both approaches in Muslim society. Secular ideologies of modern government would gain legitimacy from Islam while Islamic activism would become more pragmatic, inclusive, and tolerant.

- Carried forward, this argument would further postulate that the faith would be relegated to the individual private sphere while secular concepts of governance would underpin the political system.

This **optimistic view** of reconciling Islam and secular foundations of governance is buttressed by the empirical fact that more and more Islamic political parties and movements seem to be moving toward accepting a more pragmatic and inclusive view of Islamic politics.

Reconciling their Islamic heritage and popular demands for participatory government and individual rights has posed a dilemma for Islamic activists. This dilemma has focused on how to present Islam in a “secular” context. The on-going debate among Muslim thinkers has yet to yield a clear explanation about the interaction between secularism and Islam. For example, are the two terms “secular” and “Islam” contradictory, and can one truly talk about a “secular Islam”? Because this discourse is still in the nascent stages, advocates of “secular Islam” are still struggling to explain the concept to their co-religionists. However, it is possible to glean from media and academic analysis a perception that these advocates seem to model their notion of “secular Islam” on the Justice and Development (AK) Party in Turkey where a separation is emerging between one’s faith and public life or a separation of church and state, as it is understood in the West.

Three key analytic questions underpin the optimistic view:

- **First, is the shift in the behavior of Islamic political parties toward Western notions of democracy tactical, in order to allow them to come to power, or strategic?**

- **Second, in the next five-10 years are we likely to witness a failure of Islamic political ideology and a search for a new ideology?**
- **Third, if failure occurs, will the process be precipitous and violent or gradual and peaceful?**

Islamic thinkers who advocate continued participation in the political process have offered the proposition that secularism and Islam need not be contradictory. They frequently cite the Turkish AKP as an example of how a political party grounded in Islamic traditions could function in a secular society and in fact can become the guardian of the secular ideology of the state. This position might seem in conflict with Islamic notions of governance, but its supporters have maintained that as Islamic political parties become more mature and as they focus more and more on “bread and butter” issues, they would tend to view *Sharia* as a source of moral behavior, not as a guide of political action. According to this argument, Islamic political parties would no longer demand that *Sharia* be instituted as a state ideology or an ultimate political goal which they would aspire to attain. The longer Islamic political parties are involved in electoral politics, the more they are likely to “self-differentiate” away from radicalism, extremism, and terrorism and chart a strategic path toward democracy.

Some prominent Islamic political parties and movements – including AKP in Turkey, PJD in Morocco, the MB in Egypt, the Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait, and PAS in Malaysia – remain convinced of the utility of participation in the electoral process and see no contradiction between Islam and modern concepts of political democracy. They seem to believe that despite regime anti-democratic policies, Islamic parties could ultimately effect tangible change from within.

- Other newspapers writers have even concluded – perhaps prematurely – that political Islam has failed and that, like the secular ideologies of the past century, Islamic ideologies have reached the end of the road.

The **pessimistic view**, on the other hand, stems from the fact that many Islamic activists consider Islam a total way of life and reject electoral politics as a man-made invention that undermines God’s rule or *hukm*. According to this view, Islam cannot be separated from the public sphere. Some MB writers have even claimed that the phrase “secular Islam” is an oxymoron. The on-going debate in Arab Islamic media about the role of AKP in Turkey demonstrates the divide in the Arab world on this issue.

As more Islamic political parties participate in the political process and as some of them fail to deliver on their promises to their constituents, there are indications that popular support of Islamic parties seems to be waning. The debate within some of these parties is focusing on whether Islamic activism should continue to participate in the electoral process or whether it should abandon its political involvement and redirect its energies and resources toward Islamizing society from below, as the founder of the MB Hasan al-Banna had originally envisioned.

In the next five-10 years, the pessimistic scenario could develop as follows: Sunni Islamic political parties give up on the political process, become more fractured and more radicalized, and begin to espouse a more radical version of Salafi Islam. Their version of Salafism would be exclusive, narrow-minded, inward looking, and intolerant of fellow Muslims who think differently and of non-Muslims, especially Christians and Jews. This scenario, supported mostly by Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere and extremist Muslim Brotherhood activists, will be welcomed by al-Qa’ida and other radical groups. Several articles appeared in the summer of 2008 in Arab and international Islamic media warning of a rising conservative Salafi trend among Sunni Muslims in some Arab countries. **The**

global economic downturn and the rising unemployment in many Muslim countries could undermine the efforts of mainstream Islamic political parties to engage in the political process.

Engaging the Islamic World: A National Interest Necessity

The focus of this discussion is on the United States; however, the American experience could inform other countries' approach to the issue of outreach and engagement. The discussion in this and the following sections of the presentation draws heavily on my recent book, *A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America's Relation with the Muslim World*.¹

President Obama's election and post-inauguration statements have resonated well in the Muslim world, reflecting a willingness to move beyond the confrontational policy of the previous administration to a new era of "smart diplomacy."

The bounce from President Obama's conciliatory rhetoric among Arabs and Muslims, however, will be short-lived if it is not followed by significant policy shifts on human rights, democracy, war crimes, closing Guantanamo, and by renewed efforts at the highest level to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Arabs and Muslims accept American support for Israel as a given, but they seek a more balanced approach to the conflict. Washington's unconditional support for the Israeli government's prosecution of the 2006 war in Lebanon and the recent Gaza war undermined the traditional American "honest broker" posture.

Polling data from the last half dozen years shows that the low American standing among Muslims is reversible. Engaging Iran and other state and non-state actors in the Islamic world would help restore America's standing and prestige. It would also serve American national interest, promote international diplomacy, and isolate al-Qa'ida and terrorism.

According to polling data, Muslim negative attitudes toward the United States have been driven by American policies in Iraq, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and the bellicose rhetoric toward Iran. Muslims viewed the so-called global war on terror as a war against Islam; in their view the Bush administration had painted the entire Islamic world with one broad brush of terrorism without any distinction between mainstreamers and radicals.

While serving as a senior analyst in charge of political Islam at the Central Intelligence Agency, I frequently briefed Bush administration officials on Muslim negative attitudes toward the United States. Informed by polling data from Pew, Gallop, and other polls in Muslim countries, I informed administration officials that those negative attitudes were not caused by a disagreement over values but by a rejection of specific policies toward the Muslim world.

I also advised the Bush administration that Muslims would welcome US initiatives to reach out to mainstream Islamic parties and other credible civil society groups. Unfortunately, influential neo-cons within the administration rejected these ideas out of hand and focused instead on tactical ways to fight terrorism.

In universities and in the media, Muslims are openly debating the future of their religion and becoming more vocal in their rejection of terrorism and al-Qa'ida's radical paradigm. The Obama administration should encourage this debate and identify a smart, realistic, but more sophisticated course of action to

¹Emile Nakhleh, *A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America's Relations with the Muslim World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).

respond to positive overtures from Muslim countries and groups. The emerging dialogue in the long run could empower moderate and mainstream Muslim voices.

In order to isolate the terrorists and extremists as a fringe element among Muslims, the United States must reach out to the majority of Muslims with ideas of good governance – transparency, a genuine commitment to democracy, accountability, fairness, support of human rights and the rule of law, and opposition to repression – and policies that reflect balance, justice, and fairness.

Relations with the Arab Muslim world cannot be grounded mostly or exclusively in military and security policy. Many Muslim interlocutors told me they consider the occupation of Iraq and the bellicose rhetoric toward Iran as a twenty first-century version of the British and French colonial wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a modern version of the Crusades.

- **A Muslim interlocutor told me, “You can’t conduct public diplomacy through the barrel of a gun; boots on the ground might bring you military victory but won’t win hearts and minds.” Another one added, “We have heard a lot of speeches on reaching out to Muslims, but where is the beef?”**
- **A yet another Muslim contact asked, “How can the Americans talk about peace, the rule of law, and human dignity when they constantly wage war against Muslim countries, incarcerate Muslims, and violate their human dignity and legal rights at whim?”**

Key Arguments for Engagement

- **According to a variety of public opinion polls, vast majorities of Muslims do not support violence and reject radicalism and al-Qa’ida.**
- **Painting the Islamic world with a broad brush of terrorism since 9/11 has led to the perception that fighting terrorism is a “war against Islam.”**
- **Most mainstream Islamic political parties support elections and want to participate in the political process.**
- **Vigorous debate is raging within the Islamic world – in Muslim media, the blogosphere, and the universities – about the future of Islam and relations with non-Muslims.**
- **US low standing is reversible if new policies are adopted; a Muslim interlocutor told me, “You can’t sell hot air!”**
- **Engagement serves our long-term national interest; the engagement message should be nuanced and tailor-made for specific audiences**
- **Effective US engagement must be balanced and based on mutual respect, justice, and fairness; regain “honest broker” status**
- **According to public opinion polls, specific policies that created harmful effects during the Bush administration include:**
 - **Invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan**

- **GTMO**
- **Abu Ghraib**
- **Continued detentions in Iraq and Afghanistan**
- **Renditions to other countries**
- **Perceived one-sided US support for Israel's recent wars in Lebanon and Gaza and for Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank**
- **Bellicose rhetoric against Iran**

A Blueprint: Ten Recommendations

In order to reach out to majorities of Muslims across the globe, the United States should devise a new public diplomacy encompassing a series of clear actions that would resonate with Muslims symbolically and tangibly. In order to convince Muslim publics and activists of the genuineness of America's intent, the proposed recommendations must go beyond rhetoric.

Moreover, once recommendations are implemented, the public policy message should be conveyed by one messenger on behalf of the American president and government. The recommendations listed here are intended as a blueprint and are not new; in fact, they have appeared in several government and private public diplomacy commissions and reports since 9/11. The ten recommendations constitute a blueprint to guide future relations with the Islamic world.

- **Appoint an Ambassador to the Muslim World**
- **Dialogue with Mainstream Islamic Political Parties**
- **Institutionalize American Commitment to Democracy**
- **Develop a Parliamentarians' Exchange Program**
- **Expand Student, Faculty, and Professional Exchange Programs**
- **Encourage American Universities to Build Campuses in Muslim Countries**
- **Establish a National Imamate University**
- **Empower Muslim Reformers to Confront Radicalism**
- **Expand American Cultural Centers**
- **Partner Homeland Security with Local Communities**

These recommendations will cost money and require a massive reshuffling of the organizational chart at the State Department, the NSC, and other agencies. Public diplomacy will not succeed if it is run on a shoestring budget with minimal reorganization.

- **Unless U.S. policymakers view public diplomacy as central to U.S. national security, appropriate the necessary funds, and marshal public support for these national programs, the effort will not succeed and American credibility will remain suspect. Any policy**

revisions in the major foreign policy trouble spots must be aligned with new public diplomacy.

- **A redesigned public diplomacy can help the country regain the stature, prestige, and influence it had in the Muslim world a few decades earlier and recapture its past image as a beacon for hope, liberty, and human dignity.**
- **The current global economic crisis and the political instability and social dislocations that could result from it render the engagement efforts more urgent and of course more challenging. Hence, the linkage between engagement and national security.**

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Emile A. Nakhleh

enakhleh@msn.com