

Reaching Muslim Audiences

Farah Pandith, Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, and Geneive Abdo, journalist and fellow at the Century Foundation, presented their recommendations for the future of U.S. engagement with Muslim communities around the world at a CSIS meeting on November 24, 2008. Pandith asserted that in a post 9/11 world, the US government must go beyond traditional public diplomacy concepts of “winning hearts and minds,” engage innovatively with the “vast range of Muslim communities throughout the world” and develop ways to amplify mainstream Muslim voices that push back against violent extremism. Abdo argued that U.S. initiatives in the Middle East aren’t far-reaching enough because they are merely “preaching to the converted.” She argued that the real way to change public opinion in the Arab world is through a shift in U.S. policies and constructive work on political reform.

Pandith discussed how a global narrative that “The United States is at war with Islam” changes the environment in which U.S. diplomacy operates. Following U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, she said, distrust of the United States has grown. She argued that the State Department has responded by thinking more broadly about engaging Muslim audiences and amplifying exchange programs.

In the past, Pandith said, U.S. “engagement with Muslims” was more basic—many posts stopped at hosting a public diplomacy *Iftar* event, for example. Now, she said, the State Department is far more aggressive developing a wide range of opportunities to engage and to listen. For example, the State Department has established a “Citizen Dialogue Program” that sends Muslims abroad to talk about Muslim life in America. She also pointed to increased cultural and sports diplomacy, a revamping and enhancement of existing exchange programs, and a new focus on reaching out to Muslim youth.

Pandith also pointed to her own newly created post, which she described as the first senior-level position in the U.S. government responsible for reaching to Europe’s 20 million Muslims. For two years, she has engaged with varied communities to discuss Islam in America, how Muslims in America balance their identities, and pluralism. Pandith said these discussions were true dialogues in which European Muslims sought to discredit misperceptions about Islam.

Pandith argued that regular exchanges were vital, saying, “We don’t want to get to know them in a time of crisis, but we need to develop relationships in a time of non crisis. We need to build trust.” She added that it was vital to U.S. national security to build support with mainstream Muslims who reject violence, because they have influence and legitimacy within their own communities that a foreign government never can. Pandith contended that U.S. efforts in Europe now reach far beyond those already

favorable to the United States and seek to encompass a wide range of Muslims who are non-violent.

Pandith said that part of the State Department strategy involves engaging with Muslim communities on issues important to them such as citizenship and ethnic identity, and not merely presenting information to counter global narratives against the West. She believes that Muslims in Europe, which is her principal area of focus, are genuinely curious about the United States. She argued that it is vital to provide open channels for dialogue and allow for an “alternative for understanding” America.

Pandith also pointed to a number of other initiatives, including President Bush’s decision to create a Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). She asserted that this move has encouraged other countries with Muslim minorities to begin participating in the OIC, in turn elevating relations with this organization that represents 55 Muslim majority countries.

Abdo was less sanguine, especially as U.S. efforts are carried out in the Middle East. According to Abdo, the biggest problem with the new wave of public diplomacy is that Islamists and Islamist groups who are non-violent have been left out. She suggested that the administration only interacts with “moderates” and views a “moderate Muslim” as a Westernized one—and that the United States should consider interacting more directly with non-Westernized groups as well.

Abdo recalled an interview with a State Department official, in which the official told her that, “absent any sort of policy, we’ve been forced to send Muslim Americans abroad as citizen ambassadors to ‘change hearts and minds.’” Abdo suggested that these programs fall short of their objective in the Arab world because they simply try to paint a rosy picture of the United States rather than dealing with concerns about U.S. foreign policy and U.S. support for authoritarian governments.

In fact, Abdo said, many of the groups that the United States refuses deal with, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have large and powerful constituencies. They include many non-violent, mainstream, and mobilized segments of the population that are interested in running in elections. Some of these Islamists represent the broad opposition to the existing government. For this reason, Abdo argued, it is vitally important for the Obama administration to “rethink engaging Islamist groups,” and consider the benefits of interacting with traditional pariahs.

Abdo judged that the Bush Administration’s record overall was a dismal one. She referenced a 2007 poll conducted by the World Public Opinion group that reported the highest percentages of anti-American sentiment were found in countries in the Arab world in which there is close bilateral cooperation between the two governments. In this poll, 80 percent of Muslims stated that the United States seeks to divide the Muslim world with its policies. She argued that, in the Arab world, populations are disillusioned by broken promises of democracy promotion and “want disengagement from the United States.”

Still, both speakers found possibilities for positive change through engagement with young Muslims across the world. Abdo suggested that there is a “generational split” in the various Islamist movements across the Muslim world that is “significant in the long term.” The Muslim Brotherhood contains factions which espouse different views of the future of the movement, and which may disagree with the platform of the “old guard.” Pandith also believes that early engagement with Muslim youth in Europe is critical as they are faced with existing narratives of violent ideologies and issues of understanding their identities as Muslims in the West. “We have to know Europe’s Muslims at a time of non-crisis,” she argued.

The goal in both speakers’ strategies of engagement with Muslims was to “push back against violence” and amplify constructive cooperation. While Pandith advocated an emphasis on innovative dialogue, Abdo argued for a change in policy. Still, neither speaker found it adequate merely to seek to “win hearts and minds,” but rather to empower Muslims around the world and provide further options for action and engagement.