

# American Muslims and the 2008 Presidential Election *Policy Recommendations*



A REPORT BY

**Institute for Social Policy  
and Understanding**

***Dr. Muqtedar Khan***

Fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU)  
Director of Islamic Studies and Associate Professor,  
University of Delaware

## Contents

<b>About the Author</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What is at stake for the U.S.?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What is at stake for American Muslims?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Muslims in American Politics: The Big Picture</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>State of Muslim Politics Today</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>American Muslims and Barack Obama</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>American Muslims and John McCain</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Policy Recommendations for American Muslims</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Final Thoughts</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>14</b>

## About the Author

Dr. Muqtedar Khan is a Fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU). He is also an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations and Director of Islamic Studies at the University of Delaware. From 2003-2008 he was a senior Non-resident Fellow at Brookings Institute and from 2006-2007 he was a Fellow of the Alwaleed Center at Georgetown University.

He earned his Ph.D. in International Relations, Political Philosophy, and Islamic Political Thought, from Georgetown University in May 2000. He has been the President, Vice President and General Secretary of the Association of Muslim



Social Scientists. He is the author of *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom* (Amana, 2002), *Jihad for Jerusalem: Identity and Strategy in International Relations* (Praeger, 2004), *Islamic Democratic Discourse* (Lexington Books, 2006) and *Debating Moderate Islam: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West* (University of Utah Press, 2007).

Dr. Khan frequently comments on BBC, CN International, FOX and VOA TV, Bridges TV, NPR

and other radio and TV networks. His political commentaries appear regularly in newspapers in over 20 countries. He has lectured extensively in North America, East Asia, Middle East and Europe. Dr. Khan is from Hyderabad in India. He is married to Reshma and has a son Rumi, and a daughter Ruhi. His articles on Islam and American Muslims can be read at [www.ijtihad.org](http://www.ijtihad.org) and his commentaries on global politics can be read at [www.Glocaleye.org](http://www.Glocaleye.org).

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

O ye who believe! Seek help with patient perseverance and prayer;  
For Allah is with those who patiently persevere (Quran 2:153).

Another presidential election is upon us. A known American political adage claims that there is an inherent tendency in the American body politic to hone in toward the center; whenever the pendulum shifts too far in one direction, the political cognoscenti insist, a reversal is inevitable. For the past eight years the policy and political discourse in this country has systematically shifted to the far right. It is time a balance is restored. The tone of politics is often set at the top and it is therefore essential for change to happen in the White House. If America’s political equilibrium has to be restored then the current Presidential elections must be the turning point.

## What is at stake for the U.S.?

For America a lot is at stake, including its very identity. Over the past eight years America’s identity as a benevolent hegemon that sought to establish a liberal global order, privileging multiculturalism and democracy, and discouraging aggression has been destroyed. President Bush’s foreign policy, demeanor, language and manner in which his administration does business have brought only shame, failure and derision to America. America under Bush has become the world’s most hated nation and consequentially Anti-Americanism is now a key characteristic of global culture. The national security strategy of “preemptive strike” and the debacle of Iraq have diminished America’s influence and status, perhaps beyond repair.

### Dangers to World Peace

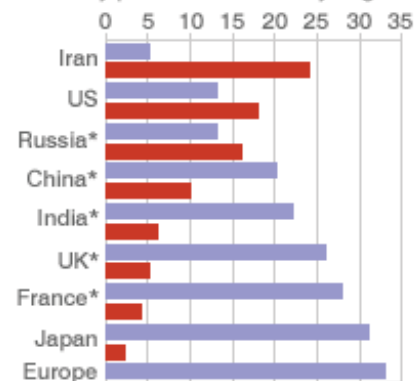
% saying 'great danger'	Iran	US in Iraq	North Korea	Israeli-Palestinian conflict
U.S.	46	31	34	43
Great Britain	34	41	19	45
France	31	36	16	35
Germany	51	40	23	51
Spain	38	56	21	52
Russia	20	45	10	41
Indonesia	7	31	4	33
Egypt	14	56	14	68
Jordan	19	58	18	67
Turkey	16	60	6	42
Pakistan	4	28	8	22
Nigeria	15	25	11	27
Japan	29	29	46	40
India	8	15	6	13
China	22	31	11	27

Pew Global Attitudes Survey, June 13, 2006

### HOW A COUNTRY IS VIEWED

Number of states where most or a large share of those asked say a country's influence in the world is:

Mainly positive (blue) Mainly negative (red)



\*Does not include country's view of itself  
Based on: 39,435 people in 33 states  
Fieldwork: Oct 2005 - Jan 2006

SOURCE: GlobeScan/PIPA (Univ Maryland)

GlobeScan and University of Maryland, 2006

Today America is perceived as an aggressive, bellicose, war mongering superpower that shoots in a hurry, only to assess damage at leisure. The above survey shows that the world sees U.S. presence in

Iraq as a greater threat to world peace than either Iran or N. Korea.<sup>1</sup> The GlobeScan and the University of Maryland surveyed nearly 40,000 people in 33 countries and found that the U.S. is the second most negatively viewed country, with only Iran more unpopular. This survey, however, has a disproportionate representation of western population and if it was done in proportion to the global population, I dare say the results would only be worse for the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, Iraq, the Patriot act, the defense and use of torture and the culture of xenophobia and Islamophobia have all become the new identity markers for the U.S.; the world recognizes that America has changed, and they resent and hate what it has become. Is this ugly image of America a temporary phase brought on by the trauma of the attacks on September 11th, or is this negative image here to stay? For most of the world and for American Muslims, the outcome of the current Presidential elections is likely to answer that question.

The U.S. economy is in recession. The housing market is in a free fall, reducing the cumulative wealth of the middle class whose riches are usually associated with their home equity. Oil prices are hurting the economy as well as the quality of life in the U.S. National debt has reached over \$9.5 trillion amounting

“ National debt has reached over \$9.5 trillion amounting to \$31,000 per citizen and increasing at 1 billion dollars a day. ”

to \$31,000 per citizen and increasing at 1 billion dollars a day.<sup>3</sup> Debt servicing is corroding the economy. In 2007 alone, the U.S. paid \$500 billion in interest on the national debt<sup>4</sup>; an amount larger than the national GDP of Sweden, the world's 18th biggest economy.<sup>5</sup> Imagine if that amount was invested in education or health care. The projected deficit for the year 2008 is \$250 billion, a conservative estimate that does not include the deficit financed economic stimulus package of \$100 billion. If America was a corporation and its financial report read as above, its stock would be falling at breakneck speed. The current policies are clearly devastating our economy and they cannot be sustained; change is necessary before things spiral out of control.

The most severe consequence of the Bush regime has been the division of the country into bitter ideological halves that have forgotten how to tolerate political differences. The right in particular has become viscous and accuses anyone who disagrees as anti-American. The anti-Muslim and Islamophobic discourses coming from numerous conservative religious leaders and talk show hosts have poured venom into the public discourse. While good policies can reverse the economic and political damage, it will take time to heal the cultural wounds self-perpetrated on this nation. The U.S. can ill afford the continuity of the Bush regime.

## What is at stake for American Muslims?

In the past there were positive incentives for Muslims seeking to engage in American politics. Recognition, influence, a seat at the table and perhaps an opportunity to reduce the severe imbalance in America's foreign policy in the Middle East were the prizes at the end of political engagement. Yet this time the incentives are increasingly negative and to some extent existential. America's political culture, legal environment and public discourse have become structurally Islamophobic. Even those who do not

harbor explicit anti-Muslim sentiments manifest them inadvertently because Islamophobia has become a structural element.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this. For months rumors have spread via email and blogs that Presidential candidate Barack Obama is secretly a Muslim. Perpetrators believe that by merely suggesting that Senator Obama is a Muslim, his chances of getting elected will be diminished. They seem to be confident that labeling him a Muslim would constitute a decisive negative for the majority of Americans since they would not accept a Muslim as President.

Defenders of Senator Obama and the candidate himself have repeatedly refuted the claim that he is Muslim and assert that he is a devout and practicing Christian. Yet this response in itself suggests a structural Islamophobia. Why couldn't Obama respond by saying "so what If I was?" Clearly he too thinks that such rhetorical gambits would be too risky. Keith Ellison, a Muslim Congressman from Minnesota, recently remarked to the New York Times: "A lot of us are waiting for him to say that there's nothing wrong with being a Muslim."<sup>6</sup> To his credit, Obama has on more than one occasion stated that the anti-Muslim prejudice inherent in accusations that he is a Muslim was disturbing.

Nevertheless, Obama is not yet ready to take on the challenge of Islamophobia directly. His goal seems to be to escape its negative impact on his candidacy and to come out of it without himself appearing to be anti-Muslim. It seems that America has developed a tolerance for anti-Muslim bigotry in its leadership. Religious leaders, media personnel, and elected officials all continue to say things about Muslims that would be construed as hate speech if used against any other community.

It is of paramount interest for Muslims that the tone at the top change so that the intolerance towards Islam and Muslims does not become a permanent feature of American society. The government, in spite of its claims to the contrary, is treating Muslims as suspects. We regularly hear of new surveillance efforts that undoubtedly targets Muslims and Muslim institutions. Even though the 9/11 commission exonerated the Muslim community of any collusion in the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the Bush administration continues to operate with the assumption that the community is infested with sleeper cells and Al Qaeda proxies.<sup>7</sup>

Change at the top accompanied by a shift in posture and discourse will go a long way in reducing hate speech against Islam and Muslims. If officials at the top make it clear that the demonization of American Muslims will no longer be tolerated, it will send a clear message to government agencies, anti-Muslim preachers and the media that they must be much more careful with what they say. While responding to the challenge of some Islamophobic preachers,

Muslims must not forget the overwhelming support and friendship of churches across the country.<sup>8</sup> They have accommodated Muslims looking for a place to pray, allow Muslims to park their cars in church parking lots on Fridays and have been enthusiastic in engaging Muslims in inter-faith dialogues and advocating both religious tolerance and respect for Islam as a religion.

“ Everyday we hear of new initiatives for surveillance of Muslims and Muslim institutions. ”

## Muslims in American Politics: The Big Picture

Muslims are now in the third phase of the evolution of American Muslim politics. The first phase, which took place prior to the 2000 Presidential elections, was a debate on whether to participate in American politics. The second phase which took place in 2003 and 2004, was the debate on the pros and cons of block voting and the endorsement of a candidate by the entire Muslim community. The community has now entered the third phase – the perplexed period.

In the first debate the Muslim community had two pressing questions to address. The first question was whether it was halal – Islamically permissible – to participate in the American political process. Many conservative leaders and members of the then active Hizbut-Tahrir argued that democracy itself was a kufr (unIslamic) system; thus the debate to engage or not became a debate about the compatibility of Islam and democracy. The second question was more practical in nature. It was whether the community stood to gain from engagement or was it better served by remaining isolated and focused on identity preservation by huddling around mosques and eschewing main street America. Fortunately the conservatives lost this debate and American Muslims embraced democracy as well as politics and proceeded to vote as a block for George W. Bush in November 2000.<sup>9</sup>

The second debate emerged in 2004, as American Muslims went to the polls dazed by post- 9/11 politics. The community was reeling from the shock of what had happened on that dreadful day and was trying to come to terms with the fact that these acts were committed by Muslims in the name of Islam. Even to this day, a large segment of the community does not believe that Muslims were responsible, even after the many statements issued by Bin Laden himself and the over whelming evidence gathered by Western and Muslim law enforcement and intelligence services. According to a Pew study of American Muslims, only 40% of the community believes that the perpetrators of 9/11 were Arabs, 28% deny it and 32% refuse to answer the question.<sup>10</sup>

This issue is important because American Muslim view of U.S. response to September 11 attacks was largely colored by who they believed the perpetrators were. Those who believed that the attackers were indeed members of Al Qaeda were more inclined to combat the rising anti-Muslim environment in the U.S. On the other hand, those who believed that the United States or Israelis had orchestrated the attack to give the U.S. an excuse to attack Islam remained hostile and fearful of American politics. This discord basically meant that unlike in 2000 when most of the community was on the same page vis-à-vis political engagement, the community was now a bit incoherent and divided.

The American Muslim leadership entered the Presidential elections with great determination. They felt betrayed by George W. Bush whom they had helped elect in 2000. Muslim leaders believed that the strength of Muslims in Broward and Miami-Dade counties, over 10,000 Muslim voters by some count and over 20,000 by other estimates, was decisive in winning Florida for Bush and sending him to the

“ American Muslims embraced democracy as well as politics and proceeded to vote as a block for George W. Bush in November 2000. ”

White House. Muslim organizations claimed that their endorsement of G. W. Bush had led to over 79% of American Muslims to vote for him, and they were now ready to use this powerful Muslim voting block to aid John Kerry.

Unfortunately for the Muslim organizations, which were now operating under the umbrella of the “American Muslim Taskforce,” there was strong dissent within the community. Several Muslim intellectuals and commentators were opposed to the idea of a block vote, including myself. Thus the second debate within the community was on “whether to vote as a block or not.” Those in favor of block voting argued that the existence of the block gave the community significant leverage and exposure; American Muslim leadership could use this lever to gain important concessions from the candidates. They also advanced the generic argument that there was strength in unity.

Critics were asking more sophisticated questions. For example, they argued that there was an ideological difference between Democrats and Republicans and wondered how the community could completely alter its ideological preferences based on which candidate was ready for a photo-op with members of the American Muslim Taskforce. Did the community have any basic principles or did they merely desire to have access to politicians? Moreover, the idea of block voting basically subverted American democracy, which is based on individual rights. Therefore the critics demanded that American Muslims should be treated as mature citizens and be allowed to vote their conscience and not follow the dictates of unelected leaders. If the entire community chose to vote for the same candidate, that was fine. Some critics also argued that endorsement of one candidate would necessarily alienate the other; if the other candidate won, the community would not be served well by block voting.<sup>11</sup>

Critics also raised the issue of legitimacy of the American Muslim taskforce, questioning on what basis was it claiming to represent the community it could not even raise enough money from the community to have an office in Washington DC. Several issues were raised about the legitimacy of the process too. The taskforce nevertheless went ahead and endorsed John Kerry, but only after several Muslim organizations withdrew after criticism arose from the community at large. The most prominent organization that withdrew from the taskforce was the Islamic Society of North America, the biggest American Muslim organization in existence. The text of the endorsement also came under severe criticism, for even though it endorsed Kerry, it also insulted him. In essence the coalition that had come together in 2000 was fragmenting by 2004,<sup>12</sup> and John Kerry’s eventual defeat and the fiasco of the endorsement left the community deflated.

## State of Muslim Politics Today

The state of Muslim politics today is mixed. The good news is that American Muslims have made some significant gains on the political stage since the 2004 elections. The historic election of Keith Ellison from Minnesota as the first Muslim Congressman in 2006 was soon followed by the fortuitous election of Andre Carson from the seventh district in Indiana in 2008. Ellison’s election was indeed a major breakthrough for American Muslims; although his religious identity became an issue both during and after the elections, he survived both times. Indeed, his decision to swear not on a Bible but on Thomas Jefferson’s personal copy of the Quran underscored Islam’s enduring relationship with America.

In addition to these landmark achievements, the most important development is that Muslim commitment to political engagement has become deep and extensive. The community no longer waits for Presidential elections to become mobilized. Muslims are now involved in Senatorial races, races for the House and also for state level and gubernatorial elections. These are all signs of political maturation. We no longer hear foolish arguments such as “democracy is kufr” and “political engagement in America is haraam,” and there is a consensus that political engagement is absolutely essential; the only thing left to desire is depth in participation.

“ [Congressman Keith Ellison’s] decision to swear not on a Bible but on Thomas Jefferson’s personal copy of the Quran underscored Islam’s enduring relationship with America. ”

A new phenomenon, however, has now begun to plague the community. Since 9/11 there has been an influx of new Muslim immigrants to the U.S. While these immigrants do not have the legal status to vote, many of them cluster around mosques and shape the political and cultural environments in those mosques. I do not have statistical data to back this assertion and hence it should be received guardedly. But talking to Muslim activists around the country, it is apparent that new immigrants that are religiously active in bringing the same anti-Americanism rampant in Muslim countries to American mosques. They perpetuate conspiracy theories about America and pour venom in the hearts of Muslims trying to come to terms with their American and Muslim identities. The Pew Study of American Muslims supports this thesis to some extent. It shows that there is a significant difference in attitudes of Muslims who have lived in the U.S. for some time and those who are new arrivals.<sup>13</sup> Coping with the imported politics of the greater Middle East adds to the strain American Muslims already feel from growing Islamophobia in the country.

Finally, contemporary Muslim politics are shadowed by a growing recognition of the diminished status of Muslims as a political force in America. Several local Muslim community leaders and some national leaders have remarked that they feel that “American Muslims are largely irrelevant” to the current Presidential elections. Candidates are not seeking them out as they did in the past, and Muslim leaders consequentially have difficulty gaining to Presidential candidates.

Two recent surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center have exposed the community and belied its claims of demographic and financial strength. From the mid 1990s until recently, American Muslim organizations claimed that there were over 6 million Muslims in the U.S. who were highly educated and wealthy. A survey by PEW (in which the Michigan based think tank Institute for Social Policy and Understanding also participated) determined that there are only 2.35 million Muslims in the U.S.; less than half of what Muslims had claimed until now. While it is arguable that the PEW study underestimates Muslim population due to certain methodological flaws, it remains the most comprehensive scientific study of the Muslim population in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

The second study by PEW that allows comparison of the demographic data of different religious groups



in the U.S. does not give Muslims the edge in wealth and education that they claim. Here is a brief comparison of Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Buddhists and Hindus [religions with small populations] based on that study.

Religious Group	College Graduate Plus Postgraduate Education <sup>15</sup>	Less Than an Undergraduate Degree	Annual Income Below \$75,000 <sup>16</sup>	Annual Income Above \$100,000
Hindus	74%	26%	34%	43%
Jews	59%	41%	42%	46%
Buddhists	48%	52%	61%	22%
Mormons	28%	72%	69%	16%
Muslims	24%	76%	74%	16%

Muslims definitely do better educationally and fiscally on average than Catholics and members of historically black churches, and are comparable to some white denominations. Yet this does not mean that Muslims as a tiny minority, less than 1% of the population, can make up for the numbers deficit with wealth and education and have a disproportionate political impact. On the issues that matter most to Muslims, especially on foreign policy in the Middle East and South Asia, Muslims do not compare favorably with the interest groups that they compete with; pro-India and pro-Israel lobbies are supported by communities which are more educated and wealthier.

I recently discussed these findings with Muslim leaders in Michigan and Washington, DC. They claimed that these surveys had methodological flaws. I agree that all surveys have methodological flaws, but these flaws would have a similar impact on all communities and not just on surveys of Muslims. Anyway, while Muslims may deny the reality that their community is smaller and weaker than they believe, the rest of America will probably accept these findings and politicians will pay them the attention the numbers warrant. This means that in 2008, the community will get lesser attention than it did in 2000 and 2004.

The institutional basis of the community has become relatively weaker as well. The government has created an environment of fear among American Muslims and they are more reluctant to support Islamic causes and organizations as a result several Muslim organizations that have experienced funding crises. New donors have also entered the fray as more and more Muslims recognize the need to engage and participate in the public sphere. The biggest change has been the loss of the American Muslim Council (AMC), which fizzled away after 2003. The AMC was the main political organization of American Muslims and nothing has yet emerged to fill its void. The inability of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) to sustain a Washington, DC presence further exposes the financial limitations under which the community operates. Contemporary Muslim politics is therefore struggling to recover from body blows suffered in the current hostile environment. It will take some time for the community to reach a comparable level of cohesion and organization as enjoyed in 2000.

## American Muslims and Barack Obama

**“ Obama is determined to become a unifying force, reaching out not just to opponents at home but also to enemies abroad. ”**

American Muslims have entered a peculiar situation with Senator Barack Obama. They need him to win – but he, it seems, does not need the Muslim vote to win. Muslims hope that if Obama wins, he will restore sanity to American politics, bring balance to its foreign policy and put a dampener on the steadily rising Islamophobia.<sup>17</sup> Obama is seen by Americans as a candidate who transcends not just partisanship but also politics. He is poised to bring about change not just in the government but also in the manner in which government does its business. Obama is determined to become a unifying force, reaching out not just to opponents at home but also to enemies abroad. Most importantly, he has awakened

a political responsibility in millions of American youth who for decades have remained indifferent to politics.

Barack Obama’s personality is a composite bridge; he is white and black, native as well as foreign, young yet mature. The black Obama carries within him the echoes of America’s disempowered margins. The Harvard Law alum Obama personifies the white elite. The Hussein in his name acknowledges that things which appear to be foreign – like Islam – are also native to America. Even his association with Rev. Wright is quintessentially American. It is a bridge to America’s dark past from where ghosts still come to haunt the present. Obama is surreal. He is like a customized bridge designed specifically to transcend every divide threatening to tear America apart today.

Of the two contenders, Obama and McCain, the former has already won the hope of nations abroad. McCain threatens the world with a third Bush term and Obama promises a radical departure. Most commentators abroad expect John McCain to basically adopt the Bush foreign policy albeit minor changes. On the positive front they expect that McCain will be less inclined to adopt tactics like torture and kidnapping that Bush has used. His acknowledgement of global warming is a relief. On the negative side they think he will repeat Bush’s folly in Iraq by starting another nightmare in Iran.

Obama, on the other hand, is viewed as free from the foolhardy hubris of neoconservatives and not completely enslaved by special interests. If he is elected, it is hoped that he will transform U.S. foreign policy. Experts overseas expect that he will be willing to seek genuine international cooperation, will rekindle the dead spirit of multilateralism and replace bellicosity and arrogance with diplomacy, tact and understanding.

I am convinced that if Obama is elected, the worldwide epidemic of anti-Americanism will deflate instantaneously and the world will reset their perceptions of America. Obama will start with a world



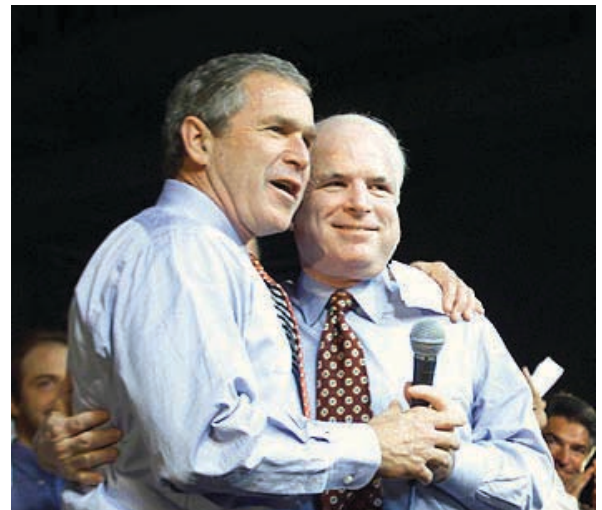
eager to work with America to repair the global damage done by the ill-advised and ill-executed policies of George W. Bush. Even in Iraq, nations across the region will cooperate to improve the regional situation. His consistent opposition to the Iraq War will also help improve relations with the Middle East.

For American Muslims, his victory will mean significant changes in the domestic environment. It will send a message that the politics of fear mongering have come to an end and anti-Muslim rhetoric and profiling at airports and elsewhere will reduce. The vindictive witch hunt that U.S. prosecutors are displaying against Muslims, so tragically manifested in the case of Sami Al Arian,<sup>18</sup> will probably come to an end. Let us keep our fingers crossed.

Unfortunately, Obama's victory is not guaranteed. He is consistently leading in the polls, but anything could happen between now and November. Yet the first time, Americans have a rare opportunity; they have a chance to elect a President whose vision and leadership is sought not just by many Americans, but most of the World. American Muslims must help their fellow Americans realize this opportunity.

## American Muslims and John McCain

John McCain has nothing to offer to American Muslims. His Presidency will prove just as dangerous and harmful to Muslims at home and abroad as that of G. W. Bush. Voting for the Republican candidate in 2008 will tantamount to replacing Bush and Cheney with John McCain and Joe Lieberman. Joe Lieberman's transition to the neocon-in-chief has been completed. He has come out from behind his veils of moderation and now his singular purpose in life seems to be to use America's power against all real and imaginary friends of Israel. In every senate hearing that he is present, he has only one question: "when are we attacking Iran, Ahmedinajad has threatened Israel." American Muslims may or may not be interested in the well-being of Iran; it is a sovereign nation with elected leaders and it fully understands the consequence of its (un)diplomacy and policies. But the rhetoric and discourses that will emerge before, during and after an invasion of Iran will escalate Islamophobia, increase hate crimes against Muslims in America and further undermine their civil rights and quality of life in general. Neoconservative policies have proven to be deceptive and catastrophic to all. Any Presidential candidate who takes Joe Lieberman as a foreign policy advisor is no friend of Muslims. While some Muslims will vote for McCain, the community at large will surely suffer if he wins.



## Policy Recommendations for American Muslims

My recommendations to the American Muslim community are two-fold. The first three recommendations refer to the broader goal of political engagement, while the rest deal with the Presidential elections of

2008.

### **Increase Depth of Engagement:**

American Muslims must go beyond voting, fund raising and endorsements. They must seek to become integral and permanent features of the electoral processes of the two parties; engagement must not be episodic but continuous. One way to do this is by becoming members of the two main parties, Republican and Democratic, and contribute to the strategic vision of these parties at the local level. In nearly every major city, there are individual Muslims who are heavily involved in local politics. Community leaders must encourage these individuals and provide them with tools and resources to make them influential in the mainstream community. Another way to engage is to provide volunteers, especially early on in the campaigns. Muslims are already doing most of these things – they just need to participate more consistently. Local communities must establish either a process or a person to liaison with the political players in their areas. For instance, if some politician is still exploring the idea of running for an office and is looking to see if he can get preliminary support from the community, it should be easy for such a candidate to find who to contact in the Muslim community.

### **Engage Issues:**

One of the American Muslim weaknesses in the political arena has been their inability to empathize with the issues that are galvanizing mainstream politics. Muslims have their own issues – civil rights at home and Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine abroad – but as a community they do not actively take a stand on the issues that matter to the rest of America such as health care, gas prices, mortgage crisis, job loss, family values, etc. As a result, Muslim community engagement with politicians is limited. Most American politicians are handcuffed when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict; there is very little flexibility in the system on that issue. But if Muslims are also active on mainstream issues, it becomes easy for politicians and other interest groups to include Muslims in the coalitions they are building. Although each of the aforementioned issues affect the Muslim community, they remain uninterested and unengaged because the issues are not considered “Islamic.” Engagement does not mean that politicians respond to Muslim needs alone – Muslims should respond to American needs too.

### **Assimilating New Immigrants:**

It is important that every mosque and every community center run a new immigrant orientation program. These programs should educate immigrants about American democracy, the Abrahamic tradition, the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and the extent of Quranic support for religious pluralism. It is important that community members have a shared value base. It is debilitating when established community leaders pursue goals based on an inclusivist interpretation of Islam and then find that while they were busy engaging the mainstream, the very mosque that was their base has become a haven for an exclusivist interpretation of Islam causing rift and discord within the community. There are several prominent cases of this happening, some of which have embroiled the mosques in tedious and expensive litigation. Communities

**“ Even if only 10% of Muslim adults can give \$200 each, the contributions would exceed \$30 million. No candidate or party can afford to ignore that. ”**

that seek to have a major impact on the American policy scene need to be united, focused, motivated and willing to go beyond the call of duty.

#### **No alternative but Obama:**

Muslims have very little leverage with regards to Barack Obama. If he spurns them, they cannot punish him by throwing their weight and vote behind John McCain. If Obama wins they benefit, if he loses they will lose. American Muslims are one constituency that Obama as an agent of change can take for granted. Muslims, regardless of Obama's demeanor towards them, vote for him and contribute as much as possible to his campaign. Muslims alone could hypothetically underwrite his entire Presidential bid; 1.5 million Muslim adults giving 200 dollars each would mean \$300 million! Even if only 10% of Muslim adults can give \$200 each, the contributions would exceed \$30 million. No candidate or party can afford to ignore that.

“ Encourage friends and relatives to register and make sure that come Election Day, they remember to vote for Obama. ”

#### **Run mini campaigns:**

American Muslims should volunteer to mobilize support and encourage campaign contributions within the

community and with their friends from outside the community. There are a lot of false rumors being spread about Obama – help expose these lies. Young Muslims active on the internet can encourage their friends to join Obama support groups on social networks such as Myspace and Facebook. Encourage friends and relatives to register and make sure that come Election Day, they remember to vote for Obama.

#### **Town Hall Meetings:**

Community leaders can help increase awareness of issues by hosting town hall style meetings. It would be great if Islamic Centers can invite the local proxies of the two candidates, hold debates about the relative merits of the candidates, and assess their policies to educate the independents who have not made their choice yet. Independents will be the key to this election; Islamic centers can become a focal point for local politics by hosting such events and keeping them open to all members of their local community, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

#### **Caution:**

American Muslim organizations must be careful how they conduct themselves from now until November. Obama will not cuddle up with American Muslim leaders now or even after he is elected – his proximity to Islam and Muslims is an Achilles heel for him as far as the American electorate is concerned. It is sad but true. Instead, American Muslims must focus on his policies and not on his personality or his personal relations with them. Support or criticize his policies, but eschew discussions about anything else. Just because a candidate is willing to reach out to Muslims does not mean that his policies will be salutary towards them; that is the lesson we learned from George W. Bush, who ambushed us after we endorsed and voted for him.

## Final Thoughts

In the near term, American Muslims will continue to face severe political and cultural challenges in the U.S. Things could undeniably get worse than what they are today. It all depends on two key factors: (1) another attack on the homeland by Muslims like 9/11 and (2) a major war between the U.S. and another Muslim country. If these two events do not happen, things will begin to improve slowly. Obama's election will expedite normalization. He may not meet with Muslims, but he will also not use fear mongering about Islam and Muslims to advance his political agenda. American Muslim leaders continue to suffer from an exaggerated perception of their own influence on Muslims and mainstream America. As a result, they have set goals for the community well beyond its current capabilities. It is important that we have a realistic view of our strengths and calibrate our goals in proportion to our ability. The important thing is to persevere patiently – God helps those who do so (Quran 2:153).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Pew Global Attitudes Survey published on June 13, 2006 on the World Wide Web at: <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=252>

<sup>2</sup> See a BBC report on this survey at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/4674656.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/4674656.stm)

<sup>3</sup> See the national debt as of now at [http://www.brillig.com/debt\\_clock/](http://www.brillig.com/debt_clock/).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.factcheck.org/demos/factcheck/imagefiles/Image/PieChart.jpg> to see how the cost of debt servicing is escalating.

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_GDP\\_%28nominal%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_%28nominal%29).

<sup>6</sup> See Andrea Elliot, "Muslim Voters Detect a Snub from Obama," *The New York Times*, June 24, 2008. On the World Wide Web: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/us/politics/24muslim.html?pagewanted=1&bl&\\_r=1&ei=5087&en=2188136bb97e5775&ex=1214452800&adxnll=1&adxnllx=1214367074-IcRsx4XoqwYYTEijeZVx2w](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/us/politics/24muslim.html?pagewanted=1&bl&_r=1&ei=5087&en=2188136bb97e5775&ex=1214452800&adxnll=1&adxnllx=1214367074-IcRsx4XoqwYYTEijeZVx2w)

<sup>7</sup> For a Muslim review of the 9/11 Commission report see, *First Impressions: American Muslim Perspectives* (Washington DC: American Muslim Taskforce, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> A recent observatory report by the Organization of Islamic Conferences, OIC, recorded the growing incidence of Islamophobia in the West. See [www.oic-oci.org/oicnew/is11/english/Islamophobia-report-en.pdf](http://www.oic-oci.org/oicnew/is11/english/Islamophobia-report-en.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> I have recounted this debate in great detail in M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "American Muslims and the Rediscovery of America's Sacred Ground," in Barbara A McGraw and Jo Renee Formicola (Eds.), *Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously: Spiritual Politics on America's Sacred Ground* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 127-148.

<sup>10</sup> See Pew Report on American Muslims, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> See M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "The Politics of Bock Voting," on World Wide Web at: <http://www.ijtihad.org/Muslimvote2004.htm>. Also see Khalid Hassan, "American Muslim Leadership Accused of Sellout," *The Daily Times*, October 21, 2004. Aslam Abdullah, "Flip Flopping AMT," *AmericanMuslimVoters.com*, October 21, 2004. <http://americanmuslimvoters.com/articles/FlipFloppingAMT.htm>

"Muslim Endorsement of Kerry Under Attack", *The Daily Times*, October, 24,2004.

See "Non-Endorsement and Irrelevance," *Muslimwakeup.com*, October 20, 2004. <http://www.muslimwakeup.com/mainarchive/001311.php>

Aslam Abdullah, "Flip Flopping AMT," *AmericanMuslimVoters.com*, October 21, 2004. <http://americanmuslimvoters.com/articles/FlipFloppingAMT.htm> See Rachell Zoll, "Muslim Leaders Lean against Endorsement," *AP Wire*, October 19, 2004. <http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/politics/9960572.htm>

<sup>12</sup> See Muqtedar Khan, "American Muslim Taskforce insults John Kerry and Alienates George Bush," on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.ijtihad.org/American%20Muslim%20Taskforce.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> See *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream* (Washington DC: Pew Research center, 2007), p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Pew Report on American Muslims, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> See Pew Survey; on the world wide web at: <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons#>

<sup>16</sup> Pew Survey; <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons#>

<sup>17</sup> See this Washington Post article on the rising negative perceptions of Islam in the U.S., Claudia Deane, Darryl Fears, "Negative Perceptions of Islam Increasing," *The Washington Post*, March 09, 2006, p. A1. On the World Wide Web at

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/08/AR2006030802221\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/08/AR2006030802221_pf.html). Also see: *Western Perceptions of Islam and Muslims*, (Market Intelligence Consultancy, 2005) on the World Wide Web at; <http://www.islamperceptions.org/WesternPerceptionofIslamandMuslims.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> For a review of Sami al Arian's case see John Halliwell, "Bush Administration: We are Working on the Legalities," *Daily Kos*, May 12, 2008. On the World Wide Web at; <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/5/12/92134/3501/509/514111>



A REPORT BY

**Institute for Social Policy  
and Understanding**

Institute for Social Policy and Understanding  
43151 Dalcoma, Suite 6  
Clinton Township, Michigan 48038

Tel: 586.416.1150

Fax: 586.415.2028

E-mail: [info@ispu.org](mailto:info@ispu.org)

[www.ispu.org](http://www.ispu.org)

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding normally does not take institutional positions on public policy issues. The views presented here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute, its staff, or trustees.

ISPU is an independent nonprofit institution committed to education, research and analysis of key US public policy issues, with an emphasis on issues related to the American Muslim community.

© 2008 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding