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The Costs and Requirements of Engaging the Muslim World

Fawaz A. Gerges
ISPU Fellow

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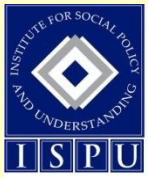

43151 Dalcoma Road, Suite 6
Clinton Township
Michigan 48038
586-416-1150 ◆ www.ispu.org

Since his inauguration, President Obama has reiterated his commitment to engaging Muslim societies and altering Muslims' negative perceptions of the United States. Time and again, the new president has stressed that "the United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam."

In his speech to the Turkish Parliament in April, Obama said that Americans will no longer view Muslims through the prism of terrorism. He told the star-struck Turkish parliamentarians: "I also want to be clear that America's relationship with the Muslim community, the Muslim world, cannot, and will not, just be based upon opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

In another strategic address to the Muslim world from Cairo in June, the president hammered home his commitment to these two key principles. Although only a statement of intentions, the address sent a clear message:

> I've come here to Cairo seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles --principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

President Obama must be commended for offering an olive branch to the United States' adversaries, including Iran, and for his moral courage and vision, both of which seek a new beginning with Muslims after years of neglect and hostility.

Under his predecessor, the relationship between the world of Islam and the United States reached a nadir point, for social engineers and terrorism experts gained the upper hand among the Bush-Cheney foreign policy team. Instead of adopting a more constructive approach --one that drew distinctions among the many faces of political Islam --they took the easier, reductionist

approach of lumping all Islamists together. They looked backward and pigeonholed mainstream and militant Islamists through the prism of al-Qaeda.

These terrorism experts and ideologues, wittingly or not, endorsed the official agenda by portraying Islamism not just as jihadism, a borderless and transnational violent fringe, but also as a mortal threat to the West, an aggressive and totalitarian ideology dedicated to random destruction and global subjugation. Still others advocated an all-out war against any manifestation of political Islam.

Building on this consensus of uninformed pundits and social engineers, President Bush ratcheted up the rhetoric by grouping all mainstream and militant Islamists together under the word "Islamofascists." He called on Americans to be prepared for a global war on terror, the "inescapable calling of our generation."

This war, Bush said, would eradicate the threat of Islamic-radical terrorism (again, a loose and incoherent term) and target rogue states that sponsored terrorism or offered lodging to terrorists. With sweeping, ideological language, Bush and Cheney's crusade set the stage for the American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, which has been costly in blood and treasure and damaging to America's moral standing in the world.

According to multiple surveys and studies, the expansion of the war on terror outside Afghanistan alienated Muslims and provided ideological motivation to al-Qaeda and global jihadists. They portray their fight against the United States as a defense of the Muslim *ummah* (community) worldwide. And so in the eyes of many Muslims, the American war on terror is a war against their religion, a war designed to subjugate their countries. Few buy the Washington narrative regarding the promotion of democracy and liberty in the Middle East; instead, they view it as a mask to perpetuate American dominance.

Given this volatile and polarized context, it is refreshing to hear President Obama's new discourse of engagement, co-existence, and reconciliation between the world of Islam and the Christian West. He has already shifted the narrative and conversation away from confrontation to heated debate and reflection.

But a fundamental question that the Obama foreign team must answer is what does the president mean by "engagement"? Is he willing to take stock of American foreign policy toward Muslim countries, particularly relations between the United States and its local authoritarian clients? Is he willing to structurally reconsider the traditional American approach toward the Greater Middle East (includes the Arab states, Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan), which views the region through the prisms of oil, Israel, and terrorism? Is he willing to listen to the hopes, fears, and aspirations of young Muslims and to take risks to help bring about real change in their societies? Is he willing to invest precious political capital in freeing the presidency from the claws of the lobbyists and special interest groups who have a stranglehold over the country's Mideast policy? Is he willing to begin the process of restructuring the United States' relations with the Muslim world on a new basis and away from dominance and hegemony?

In other words, what are the requirements and costs of engagement? What do they entail? Will President Obama translate his high-minded rhetoric into concrete action?

Fortunately for the president's team and readers in general, a few critical books have just come out that address the very same question of engaging Muslims and what America must do to transform its current deadly embrace with that part of the world. One of the most empirically and analytically sound is Juan Cole's *Engaging the Muslim World* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2009).

Effective engagement requires a complete reorientation and transformation of American foreign policy, argues Cole --a leading historian, author of the widely read blog Informed Comment, and a scholar of Islam at the University of

Michigan. In his provocative and sweeping book, he calls for a sustained and broader engagement with the Greater Middle East based on mutual interests and a full understanding of the region's politics, society, and culture. The region is and will continue to be pivotal to American security in terms of energy, terrorism, and even our public perceptions of one another.

Cole calls on American policymakers to construct a new approach, one that takes into account not only the United States' national interests but also the concerns and needs of Muslims. He does not mince words about those neoconservatives who hijacked American foreign policy during the Bush administration by using the politics of fear to carry out their expansionist agenda. In fact, taking on the neocons cost him tenure at Yale. And he pulls no punches here.

By conflating legitimate Islamic political activism with bin Laden's terrorism, the Bush ideologues fueled a powerfully irrational "Islam Anxiety" that resonated with many Americans. Cole traces the origin of this phenomenon to the country's dependence on the Gulf's oil: "Our need for foreign sources is a security issue ... And yet our energy dependence on the Muslim world generates a good deal of Islam Anxiety."

The deliberate misinterpretation of Arab and Muslim politics fed a false impression that a majority of Sunni Arabs are fundamentalists and that "they might even try to erect an al-Qaeda state that would strike at the U.S. mainland." Americans were told that their warriors were fighting in Iraq to prevent al-Qaeda and its affiliates from striking American supermarkets and neighborhoods.

Islam Anxiety, Cole contends, is an invented monolith that encompasses widely differing political actors who have little in common with one another --Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia's Wahhabis, Iraq's secular Ba`thists and religious fundamentalists, the Iranians writ large, the Taliban and the Pashtun tribes in Pakistan-Afghanistan, and the global entity al-Qaeda. Cole systemically dismantles the Islam Anxiety bogeyman, breaking it down and showing that differences and disagreements within Muslim politics are far more important than supposed solidarities.

For example, al-Qaeda's stated goal is to overthrow the pro-American Saudi monarchy and replace it with a more authentic religiously based state. In contrast, since the late 1960s the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood has renounced the use of violence in the service of politics and accepted the rules of the political game. There is also a fierce rivalry between Shi`i-dominated Iran and Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia, which is polarizing the entire region along sectarian lines. How, then, can the two groups be cut from the same cloth?

Cole also punctures holes in America's Islam Anxiety over Afghanistan and Pakistan and draws clear distinctions between the Taliban and al-Qaeda's global jihadists. Regardless of how one views the regressive and reactionary Taliban, its focus is limited to Afghanistan and Pakistan; the group has shown no interest in waging a transnational, borderless war like al-Qaeda has. By conflating potential negotiating partners with violent fanatics, our myopic interpretation of the Islamist threat has now moved firmly into South Asia.

According to Cole, the United States' fear of an imminent extremist takeover in Pakistan, which only makes matters worse, also stems from a lack of distinction between rural and urban publics and their political beliefs and preferences. Time and again, the urban population has voted against fundamentalist groups (including in the most recent elections).

Although Pakistan faces grave challenges because of internal ruptures, differing ideological conceptions among the dominant elite, vast socioeconomic disparities in the world's sixth-most populous country, and an almost-bankrupt and failed state, the United States is exacerbating regional extremism. We are not an innocent bystander in the

unfolding tragedy in Pakistan:

"Both urban and rural dissidents profoundly resented American backing for Musharraf, seeing the Bush administration as an impediment to political change. America was coded as standing for arbitrary decree as opposed to rule of law and for brutal repression as opposed to political compromise."

The Bush administration's blind support for Musharraf almost to the very end fueled the country's crisis and played into the hands of the Pakistani Taliban: "The pressure the United States has put on the military to attack other Pakistanis in the northwest inspires nationalist objections, even from middle-class people that have no sympathy for the Pakistani Taliban." Our continued involvement has only served to intensify the violence.

There is a real danger that "the immensity of the U.S. and nato footprint in this fiercely proud tribal Muslim region may actually be creating the threat it ostensibly seeks to avoid: the reconstitution of al-Qaeda and the revival of the 1980s discourse on holy war that proved so deadly to the Soviet Union."

In Afghanistan, Cole cautions American policymakers against equating the independent-minded Pashtun tribes with the Taliban. Again we see the misperception in American politics that all Muslim fighters are motivated by the same brand of extremism: "The conflation of Pushtuns, and their love of relative autonomy, with Talibanism frequently obscures the local politics that drive militancy."

The remedy consists of providing development aid that supports civilian politics, lifting the Afghans out of extreme poverty (a leading driver in the Taliban's recruitment of fighters), and reaching a negotiated settlement with the Pashtun tribes. The Pashtuns are key to peace, for they fight foreign troops only because it gives them a real stake in the political and economic order. By creating a viable armistice, the Pashtuns will be one less armed force that the United States must face in the region. Otherwise we are bound to make the same mistake --fighting our enemies and our possible allies --much as we did with al-Qaeda and more moderate local political groups.

Cole does not buy the strategy of military escalation against the Taliban in Afghanistan, although I am confident he will approve of Obama's focus on foreign aid to local communities and ordinary people:

"It is unlikely that a foreign military force could repress rebellious Pushtun tribes by main force. Afghanistan is a big, rugged country, and much of the population is organized by clan and tribe. It has never had a strong centralized government, and the last regime that even attempted such a thing was probably the communists of the 1980s, who were overthrown by angry mujahideen and executed."

But in the end, arguments on violent extremism always return to the Middle East. More than anything else, Cole rightly asserts that helping to engineer an Arab-Israeli settlement would defuse "90 percent" of America's Islam Anxiety. Let's face facts: We certainly won't be getting rid of the root cause --our oil dependence --any time soon. Other avenues must be found. Similarly, the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq "would reduce America Anxiety in the Muslim world and would eliminate a prime cause of Islam Anxiety for the American public.

Like Cole, in his informative and revealing *A Necessary Engagement* (Princeton University Press: 2008), Emile Nakhleh, former director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program in the cia's Directorate of Intelligence, paints a grim and stark portrait of American policymakers' failures to understand the most basic attitudes that Muslims have of themselves, each other, and the West. He is bitter about the resistance of senior Bush officials to learning about the complexity and diversity of religiously based movements in the Muslim world despite the numerous efforts that he and top cia analysts undertook to better guide them.

One of Nakhleh's central arguments is that there are qualitative, dramatic differences and distinctions between bin Laden's violent global jihadists and mainstream political-Islamist parties with a huge social base, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine. Nakhleh argues that while the former should be confronted and excluded, the latter three "should be welcomed as potentially credible partners in the political transformation of their societies."

Instead, the Bush team viewed the Muslim world with its 1.4 billion citizens through "the prism of terrorism," lumping al-Qaeda terrorists with religious activists who have shown "their commitment to the democratic process and their pragmatic approach to politics and political change." According to Nakhleh, this was the worst thing the United States could do. Conflating all of those religiously oriented actors, as the Bush administration did, and declaring all-out war against them was (and remains) a recipe for failure and perpetual conflict with important segments of Muslim societies.

In a revealing interview with the Arabic newspaper *Al Hayat*, Nakhleh says he tried --but failed --to convince his superiors in the Bush administration to engage Hamas after it won the 2006 parliamentary elections. The dominant official view opposed talking to Hamas leaders unless they radically shifted their stance on Israel.

The alternative, notes Nakhleh, is for the Obama administration to rethink the Bush approach, because there can be no stability or real political reform in the region without engaging Hamas, Hezbollah, and like-minded organizations. These influential social movements have evolved politically and gained public legitimacy at home at the expense of secular parties and extremist groups alike.

Engagement, in Nakhleh's opinion, requires viewing the leading social movements in the region through a radically different prism than terrorism.

Alarmingly, he reveals that although mid-level American officials knew better than to frame the war in black-and-white terms and label differing actors and groups together as terrorists, always expanding the enemy's territory, they had little say and input in decision making. According to the author, a disconnect existed between the first and second tiers of the Bush foreign policy team in terms of access to intelligence and scholarly knowledge. Nakhleh's insider account puts to rest Bush and Cheney's claim that they, like the policy establishment, were misled and misinformed by the intelligence community.

Reaching consensus, a former senior cia analyst and a leading scholar on Islamic politics provide ample evidence of the urgent need to steer the American ship of foreign policy in a different direction. With a new, visionary president in the White House, these two books could not have come out at a better moment.

While Obama has not yet crafted his policies toward the Greater Middle East, his rhetoric borrows a page or two from both authors' books. If he carries out his vision of genuine engagement, constructively tackling thorny conflicts in the region and overhauling Washington's dominant narrative about the world of Islam, he will be remembered as the first president who won Muslim hearts and minds and dealt a final blow to extremism.

Fawaz A. Gerges, is a fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU). He holds the Christian A. Johnson Chair in Middle Eastern Studies and International Affairs at Sarah Lawrence College. His most recent books are The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global (Cambridge University Press: 2009) and Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy (Harcourt: 2006). An earlier version of this article appeared in The National Interest.

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43151 Dalcoma Road, Suite 6
Clinton Township, Michigan 48038