
Engaging the Muslim World

A Conversation with Hassan Abbas

FLETCHER FORUM: *Let's start with President Obama's speech to the Muslim world in Cairo in June 2009, almost a year ago. Has that speech altered U.S.–Muslim relations? Was it a step in the right direction or simply words that remain unsubstantiated?*

HASSAN ABBAS: I think we should start even earlier than the Cairo speech. President Obama, during his presidential campaign, provided many indicators regarding his insights about the politics of the Muslim world, and particularly about his knowledge of the Muslim minority within the United States. His nuanced policy statements about Islam and Muslims created many expectations among Muslims early on. Newspapers and magazines published in various parts of the Muslim world sounded very pro-Obama during the presidential election season in the United States. His statements during the campaign—where he made a case for creatively engaging the Muslim world—were indeed very insightful. At one point, he very clearly said that he would address the Muslim world from a Muslim country, and so I think people were very much looking forward to his speech.

I remember the day he was elected. I was sitting in one of the media centers in Washington, DC, as an analyst for Geo TV, which had organized live coverage of the election results for Pakistani and South Asian audiences. Most Pakistanis interviewed for the channel were jubilant when it became clear that Obama was surely winning. Just glance through the editorials of many newspapers in Turkey, Indonesia, and Egypt the day after Obama's victory and this feeling is clearly reflected.

Coming now to your question on the Cairo speech, there was debate among Muslims whether Cairo was the best place for the speech. For

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instance, many argued that he should have chosen a Muslim democracy such as Turkey or Indonesia. But he opted for Egypt, which says a few things. One, he did that knowing that this is an Arab country ruled by a dictator. However, he chose Al-Azhar University, one of the most important centers of Islamic learning, as the forum for his address, which in turn won the hearts of many. Irrespective of these issues, in terms of relations between the United States and the Muslim world, his message was addressed to a global audience of Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

He emphasized the need for a relationship based on respect. I think President Obama had it exactly right. This is the real issue vis-à-vis the “Islam and the West” debate. The political issues are all critical—the conflict zones and America’s role in those conflicts are also critical—but the nature of suspicion in the Muslim world about the West in general and the United States in particular needed to be tackled. President Obama very intelligently, and I believe very sincerely, reframed the issue when he said that he was in Cairo to seek a new beginning “based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition.” I think the significance of this assertion is still not recognized to the extent that it should have been, both in the Muslim majority states and in the United States.

FORUM: *To follow up on that, do you think the Obama administration has succeeded in matching the promise of “mutual interest and mutual respect” with concrete steps toward engagement?*

ABBAS: In his speech, President Obama mentioned the potency of positive

..... engagement in the Muslim world as a way of sidelining extremists. This parallels a view within the Muslim world, which argues that you must not only fight the extremists or the militants, but also work to empower the progressive and liberal forces in the Muslim world.

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..... I believe that more interaction and “a relationship of respect and mutual interest” will naturally lead to empowering progressive Muslim intellectuals. I must add that the West has always been interacting with an elitist and largely non-representative group of the Muslim world, whether it is in

Egypt, Pakistan, or Jordan. It is tragic that this Westernized elite of the

Muslim world, in most cases, is disconnected from their own people. Often this elite is involved in oppression and autocracy. So most people in the Muslim countries, who have negative feelings about their own governing elite, by default develop a very anti-U.S. or anti-Western view because they see the West or America through the lens of their own leaders, who are perceived as great friends of the United States. This issue is particularly relevant to the politics of the Arab states today.

I think the Obama administration understands that it must bridge the gap between America and the non-elite Muslims of the world. Another aspect of President Obama's policy which I think is working toward building this relationship is the decision not to use the words "war on terror," because this phrase is not only very unpopular in the Muslim world, it is also contradictory in many ways. Many Muslims interpreted it as a "war on Islam" and viewed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the atrocities of Abu Gharib, in this light.

FORUM: *The United States is currently in the middle of two wars in Muslim countries. What have been the most significant effects on U.S.–Muslim world relations of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?*

ABBAS: After nine years in Afghanistan, very few of the commitments regarding the rebuilding of infrastructure, schools, and hospitals have been realized. This is largely because most of the financial and military focus of the United States was on its presence in Iraq.

The U.S. intent to dislodge the Taliban government in Afghanistan was a justifiable one in the context of the September 11, 2001 attacks and given that the Taliban were harboring al-Qaeda. United Nations Security Council resolutions clearly sanctioned action in support of the Afghan people's efforts to dislodge the Taliban. Moreover, I believe that the Taliban ideology needed to be refuted, and the way the minorities were dealt with in that regime, the way the women were treated, and the way violence had become a tool of the state, that had to be defeated. This was done swiftly and largely successfully.

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The Taliban, however, reemerged around 2004 because the new government set up in Afghanistan never received sufficient state-building support from the international community. Most of the money that was spent in Afghanistan was in the security sector and in this context it is a very important question why, despite an extraordinary focus on security, Osama bin Laden has not been brought to justice. Indeed Taliban forces received support from militants from across the Pakistani border, where the “Pakistani Taliban” emerged in recent years. But the Afghan Taliban were also able to regain their lost space as the people who were ruling Afghanistan from 2001 onwards did not demonstrate to the Afghan population that they could make a difference. So now, after nine years, we are asking this question: “Can we have democracy in Afghanistan?”

It is the wrong question to ask. It is the wrong assumption, because we never gave the opportunity to the Afghan people to pursue a democratic path in the real sense of the word. Brutal warlords of yesteryears remained in power and opium production thrived during the years when the West was attempting to reform and rebuild Afghanistan.

In reference to Iraq, in my opinion, getting rid of Saddam Hussein was a good thing. Saddam’s autocratic rule and his track record of butchering Kurds and Shiites was well known. His use of chemical weapons against Iran as well as his own people was a crime against humanity. The question raised about Saddam Hussein within the Muslim world is a different one: “Were there no other avenues to get rid of Saddam Hussein?” And even if military action was necessary, it should have been done with the support of a broad-based coalition and a specific UN mandate. Secondly, once Saddam Hussein was driven out of office, several catastrophic decisions were made for which ordinary Iraqis have paid through their nose. In the West, we were only counting the casualty figure of Western forces—but a major sectarian crisis was brewing inside Iraq that led to a very high number of Iraqi civilian deaths. Thousands also became part of the ‘collateral damage’ of the 2003 military action.

One crucial development that deserves recognition is the role of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the leading Iraqi religious scholar, in stabilizing Iraq. Sistani stood for constitutionalism and a central role for Iraqis in the constitution-making process. Many Americans who were involved in the constitution-making process were pretty surprised when they heard Sistani say that Iraqi democracy will be based on “one person, one vote.” Americans could not agree more. Sistani was also able to largely hold back his Shiite supporters from any revenge attacks against Sunni groups involved in violence.

The net result of the Iraq war, however, has largely been negative for the American image in the Muslim world. It is true, however, that the rise

of Shiites in Iraq has changed the geopolitical dynamics of the Arab world as Shiite minorities in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are now more assertive and even the Shia majority in Bahrain (which has been kept outside of the halls of power) is beginning to be empowered socially and politically. A sectarian balance of sorts is also emerging, which may help pluralism in the Muslim world. But, the question remains as to why the U.S. presence in Iraq had to be so prolonged and why so many resources were diverted toward this area rather than rebuilding Afghanistan and avoiding resurgence of Taliban.

If, after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, Iraq turns out to be a stable and sustainable democracy, then that will be

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a great outcome. That will also perhaps encourage democratization in other parts of the Arab world. However, in the meantime, the United States will continue to have to face criticism and skepticism about why it went into Iraq.

So these are the kinds of challenges President Obama faces while dealing with the Muslim world. And we have not even touched the Israel-Palestine conflict, where important American initiatives for achieving sustainable peace are underway, despite significant obstacles. Obama inherited these crises and he has started off very well by ensuring that the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq proceeds as planned.

FORUM: *The previous administration put forward an agenda of democracy promotion. What are your thoughts on democracy promotion and can such an agenda work? What have been the implications of this democracy promotion in the Muslim world?*

ABBAS: As you mentioned, the issue of democracy promotion gained currency during the Bush administration. When the United States started arguing for democracy in the Muslim world, but then refused to allow Hamas to form a government after its electoral success in the Palestinian territories, this was seen through a very critical lens by many Muslims. It was interpreted as: “America likes democracy only when its friends are elected.”

Contrary to the views of many westerners, Muslims are not inherently anti-democratic for any religious or theological reasons. The growth of democracy is primarily a matter of time—as Muslim states will have to go through the process of establishing, sustaining, and nurturing democratic institutions appropriate to their circumstances, religious needs, and environment. The basic ingredients for establishing a truly democratic

order are already present in many Muslim societies. After all, countries like Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, to name a few, opted for democratic models. There were clearly prevalent conceptual and ideological resources that inspired these societies to strive for democracy—especially in the face of military dictatorships and autocracy.

The Quran does not prescribe any specific system of government for Muslims, leaving it to them to craft one according to their needs and aspirations. However, it clearly provides goals and ideals of governance: a) establishing a system of justice, b) providing security for the people, c) promoting consultation (and even consensus building) on important matters, and most importantly, d) exercising *Ijtihad*, the use of independent and rational judgment. One can strongly argue that these religious principles of governance can best be achieved through democracy. Moreover, there is nothing in the Quran or *Hadiths* that even indirectly supports the idea of monarchy or autocracy.

Some of the crucial issues in this domain pertain to women rights and minority rights. Here it is important to distinguish religious principles from practice in some Muslim societies, especially where pre-Islamic tribal traditions play a dominant cultural role. The first and the most beloved wife of Prophet Mohammad, Khadija was running an independent business at the time of their marriage.

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Also, a progressive interpretation of the Quranic verse “there is no compulsion in religion” provides a strong basis for equitable minority rights as well as a clear indication that one is free to change one’s religious views without any legal consequences. There is no dearth of Muslim scholars and jurists living in Muslim societies who interpret such Quranic injunctions progressively and liberally. The provisions of *Meesaq-e-Medina* (the Charter of Medina) drafted and agreed

to by Prophet Mohammad unequivocally supported the right of all religious communities to practice their faith freely. For instance, Jews in Medina were declared part of the overall community—the *Ummah*. Last but not the least, the letter of Imam Ali Ibne Abi Talib, the fourth caliph of Islam, to Malik Ashtar, the Governor of Egypt, effectively laid down the principles of governance that are very relevant to any Muslim democracy today.

In this context, the United States can do a lot, especially by first helping some of the Muslim countries with democratic institutions to improve governance. We must remember that whereas Western democracy is a product of hundreds of years, it is a much more recent phenomenon in the Muslim world. So Muslims are learning and relearning the lessons of history and adapting to modernity and the West needs to be a little patient with the Muslim experimentation.

FORUM: *Islamist radicalization is obviously a worrisome phenomenon, both for Western governments and the broader Muslim world. What would you recommend that the Obama administration do to support de-radicalization?*

ABBAS: Radicalization certainly is a critical aspect of U.S.–Muslim world relations that needs to be focused on. I have the following recommendations for the Obama administration. First, the overall policy, in whatever way it is framed, should be clear and consistent. Contradictory approaches create distrust and suspicion. Second, the United States should avoid getting involved in sectarian politics within the Muslim world at all costs. Third, the United States should support Muslim reformists and liberal intellectuals who are considered credible and authentic within the Muslim societies, irrespective of their political leanings (pro-Western or not). Fourth, U.S. funds and aid should be geared towards support and reform of public education systems in Muslim states, as that would naturally counter the messages being promulgated by conservative and extremist religious centers. Finally, there is clearly a dearth of progressive publishers in many Muslim states, whereas conservative and extremist writers (religious as well as political) have many avenues to get their works published. Hence, there is an urgent need to encourage expansion of progressive and liberal publishing houses in Muslim states.

FORUM: *Do you have any concluding thoughts that you would like to share?*

ABBAS: I think President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton deserve appreciation for appointing some bright and capable American Muslims in important positions in this administration. It is a matter of pride for The Fletcher School that two of these are Fletcher alumni: Vali Nasr (senior advisor to Ambassador Holbrooke), who is also a professor at Fletcher, and Farah Pandith (the U.S. Representative to Muslim communities). Various American Muslim communities can also act as bridge-builders between the United States and the Muslim world. For their part, American Muslims must actively strive to make America more safe and secure. ■