

### **Bridging the Divide?**

On January 9, 2006, in Washington, DC, the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution hosted the highest level meeting between the Bush administration and the American Muslim community. Entitled

“Bridging the Divide?” and organized by the Brookings Project on US Policy toward the Islamic World, representatives of various Muslim organizations were granted the opportunity to interface with C. David Welch, the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. The conference, a follow-up to previous initiatives on “Bridging the Divide” theme, sought to bring together key leaders and specialists “to explore the potential space for the American Muslim community to assist and advance US policy towards the Islamic world and capabilities within the community that might be better tapped.” In attendance were representatives from the American government, officials from a variety of American Muslim organizations, American Muslim foreign policy experts, others from the Washington think-tank and policy communities, and students.

In the opening speech, Welch acknowledged several unique characteristics about the American Muslim community: its integration into American civic life; being Americans as well as Muslims; and, despite post-9/11 tensions, steering a moderate course while confronting extremist Islamist tendencies. As evidence, he cited the Fiqh Council of North America’s recent fatwa against Islamic terrorism that was endorsed by major Muslim organizations. He recognized that American Muslims can play an exceptional role in explaining the American position, given their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic ties with the Islamic world, and acknowledged the history of conflict between the United States and the Muslim world. In addition, he condemned the seeming “civilizational strife” between Islam and the West as a pointless “jihad/crusade.” He stated that he was more comfortable with the relationship of the United States with the Muslim – especially Arab – world as being defined by a dialog stressing the commonalities of belief in God, virtue, family life, and socioeconomic justice.

Welch also stressed that the United States is not attempting to subjugate the Muslim world or make it into “a copy of its own.” In his words, the United States believes in the birthright of everyone to be free and live as full citizens in their countries and, therefore, is not intent upon changing these societies; rather, it seeks to empower people in the region; help them with education, economic development, science and technology; and support private enterprise. This policy is not born out of altruism, but out of self-interest, security needs, and strategic objectives. The Muslim world’s recent past has certainly not been pleasant – colonialism and the cold war produced revolutionary regimes, many of which hid their despotism – and yet people are organizing and historic moves are underway with impulses toward freedom. Admittedly, these moves cannot be generalized and are inevitably inter-

preted in different sociopolitical contexts. Significant examples in the Arab world are the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the Egyptian and Iraqi elections, and the Palestinian control of an international border, even though these maneuvers remain problematic. Hence, American Muslims can play a positive role in these areas of American interests, while history will judge American efforts in the region toward initiating change.

His speech was followed by a brief but frank open question and answer period during which he fielded responses from conference attendees. Muslim representatives voiced concern over the low number of Muslim employees at the State Department and in the Foreign Service, including the lack of Muslim officials in the Bush-appointed entourage to promote the United State's image in the Muslim world. Other issues raised were the low level of scientific and technological exchanges between the United States and the Arab/Muslim world; the centrality of the Palestine issue to terrorism and perception of the United States among Muslim populations; and, domestically, issues surrounding the impact of 9/11's fallout on the constitutional and civil liberties of American Muslims, especially those of Arab and South Asian descent.

In response, Welch acknowledged the credibility gap that involves, on the one hand, the Bush administration's recognition of the positive role that American Muslims can play in promoting the country's interests among foreign Muslim populations and the apparent incoherence of official policy as regards including more Muslims at the highest levels of government and, on the other, the country's credibility gap with the Muslim world. The Bush administration is open to ideas on bridging these divides, but it cannot apologize for balancing its security needs and values, although what the right balance is remains elusive. Public diplomacy has not been inactive on these issues.

In his introductory remarks, Peter W. Singer (Senior Fellow and Director, Project on US Policy towards the Islamic World, Saban Center) outlined specific initiatives that should come from the American Muslim community, such as repudiating rumors and conspiracy theories in the Arab Muslim world concerning this country's "intense scrutiny" of Muslims, coming to terms with the knowledge deficit in Americans' understanding of Islam, and creating opportunities to educate people about their faith. Conference co-chairman Muqtedar Khan (Professor, University of Delaware and non-resident Fellow, Saban Center) commented that the Bush administration's special envoy to the Muslim world, Karen Hughes, should address not only bigotry and intolerance abroad but also at home, as they impact on the immigrant Muslim com-

munity. Such attitudes are highlighted by a significant drop in American approval of Islam and the growing Islamophobia, both of which are fueled by right-wing conservatives from the pulpits, the media, and the public square. Khan also noted that United States is now an integral part of the Muslim world, because of choices that constitute its foreign policies, and that the question for the American Muslim community is what it can do to influence American policy in the Arab/Muslim world.

Islamic organizations represented at the conference included the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers (AMSE), and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), to name a few.

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