

A New Beginning

Strategies for a More Fruitful
Dialogue with the Muslim World

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FOREWORD

The spread of anti-American feeling in the Islamic world is a serious problem for the United States. The growth of hostility to America in Muslim countries increases recruitment and support for extremism and terror. It also undercuts U.S. efforts to promote reform, making America's embrace a millstone for the local allies whose support we need. Anti-Americanism also threatens to damage the commercial and investment climate for U.S. business in countries that are essential energy sources and potentially significant markets. And it hurts tourism, exchanges, and other ties that help connect America with Muslim lands.

Although the seriousness of the problem has won growing recognition, neither public nor private efforts have addressed Muslim hostility to America with the sustained focus or resources required. A series of reports on public diplomacy, including two Task Force reports by the Council on Foreign Relations, has languished. In part, at least, this seems due to two widespread views about Muslim anti-Americanism: that "they hate us for who we are" and thus cannot be persuaded otherwise; and that "they hate us for what we do," such that attitudes cannot shift without major policy changes. Both of these views are partly true, but neither comprises the whole truth.

This report by Craig Charney and Nicole Yakatan shows that it is possible to project a more favorable image of America in the Muslim world. Through focus group research in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia, they learned that although hostility is intense, there is an opportunity to change minds. It will take listening, a humbler tone, drawing more attention to U.S. aid to development and reform, and agreeing to disagree on select security issues. It will also require significant resources over an extended period of time. America has a historic chance to establish a new dialogue with the peoples of Muslim lands. This report provides useful guidance in how to go about it.

Richard N. Haass
President
Council on Foreign Relations

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Craig Charney

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Focus group research in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia has shown that it is possible to improve the image of the United States in the Muslim world. Although many Muslims are angry at what they perceive America does, the right efforts to communicate can produce significant shifts in attitudes. Such efforts would involve listening more, speaking in a humbler tone, and focusing on bilateral aid and partnership, while tolerating disagreement on controversial policy issues. Fortunately, a window of opportunity has opened with the Iraqi elections, renewed hope for Israeli-Palestinian peace, tsunami relief, and developments in Lebanon and Egypt, as well as the start of a new administration in Washington. This moment, marked by an easing of tensions and the arrival of new actors on both sides, offers the possibility of a new beginning in America's dialogue with the Muslim world.

This research took place at a time of cautious optimism in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia, reflecting new leaders and reforms they have launched. Even the December 2004 tsunami has not dampened hope in Indonesia; relief efforts have promoted national unity there instead. People in all three countries, however, are dissatisfied with their growth rates; joblessness, inequality, and, in Indonesia, foreign debt worry them. They see the keys to economic success as being education, a strong work ethic, less government intervention, and adherence to the rule of law, and they largely recognize the need to open up to world markets. None wants to go back to an idyllic Islamic past or to exclude girls or women from schools or jobs.

The focus group members' priorities for their countries—economic growth and the educational improvements needed to sustain it—reflect their views on development and its sources. But crime, terrorism, public services, moral decline, and social order also concern them. Their priorities for foreign aid follow their perceptions of their countries' needs: the economy and education come first, followed by health care, law enforcement, and elections.

Despite their satisfaction with their new leaders, the focus group members lack confidence in government institutions and want more accountability via free elections and the rule of law. They see these reforms as necessary for better

governance, even though they do not list “democracy” as their country’s top priority. Most profess no concern in the event that a free vote might bring Islamic parties to power. They assume that an elected Islamic government would be moderate and would seek moral improvement, not Iranian-style theocracy (which repels them). Prominent local Islamists have little following among the educated Moroccans and Egyptians but have some standing among Indonesians. Osama bin Laden retains substantial appeal as an anti-American symbol in all three countries. Yet in general, the focus group members’ priorities and concerns would be familiar to people anywhere in the developed world, and, indeed, to most Americans. They want into our world, not to leave it or destroy it.

Attitudes toward America in the Islamic countries in this study are marked by ambiguity and ambivalence—but they have become much more negative in recent years. The first section of this report lays out the current mix of attitudes toward America in Egypt, Morocco, and Indonesia. Immediate reactions to the United States reveal resentment of American power and of President George W. Bush. American behavior is perceived as being largely predatory. This hostility is spilling over into negative attitudes toward American people and brands. Yet Muslims still respect, if somewhat grudgingly, America’s economic strength, educational and legal systems, and work ethic. They recognize that America possesses what they believe their own societies need most to develop. They are of two minds about American popular culture, drawn to American styles and movies yet appalled by their violent and lewd aspects. Many Muslims are so alienated that they claim they would not like to visit the United States, nor would they mind if the United States withdrew—politically, economically, and militarily—from the Muslim world. There are some predictable demographic differences—older people, women, and those further from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are less hostile—but the most striking finding in this study is how widely anger has spread across the different demographic groups and countries.

The second section of this report examines the major factors that have helped produce the hostility that dominates thinking about America in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia. This hostility is a change for the focus group members: most recall

that their earlier attitudes toward the United States were quite favorable and feel disappointed now. American military action in recent years—the invasion of Iraq and the war on terror—has been interpreted in ways that cast the United States as domineering and unpredictable. Since September 11, 2001, the United States is also viewed as hostile to Muslims both abroad and domestically, in its visa policy as well as in daily life. The Palestinian intifada and the Bush administration's embrace of Israel's government have helped strengthen the impression of double standards in America's treatment of Muslims. These have been reinforced by widespread stereotypes and misinformation about American foreign policy, particularly regarding Jewish influence on it, even among the well-educated Muslims in the focus groups.

Another important influence is the rise of television, especially Arabic satellite networks such as al-Jazeera; their constant critical coverage of U.S. policy is the main source of information about America for focus group members and drives local Arab media. Still, many feel they are not getting the whole story and want to learn more about America. Unfortunately, they do not take seriously U.S. government media, such as Radio Sawa, al-Hurra TV, and *Hi* magazine, as information sources. Moreover, American development assistance has become all but invisible to the populations it benefits, even as its budget has soared in recent years. (The widely reported American tsunami relief effort in Indonesia showed how much an awareness of aid matters: the follow-up focus groups revealed that it softened hostility and exposed people there to new information about the United States, although it did not by itself reverse the hostility to America.)

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that to the focus group participants, America's message today seems to be about power and dominating the world. (Significantly, the one exception was among older women in Morocco, where America has strongly supported women's rights and political reform.) A Bush administration pledge to fight terrorism and help the Muslim world was roundly and uniformly rejected, but this does not mean the focus group members want nothing to do with the United States. What Muslims say they want from America is respect,

understood as consultation and nonintervention, and development aid in which they, not Americans, define their needs.

There are important openings for America to communicate more effectively and regain ground in the Islamic world, the focus groups show, despite the extent of hostility at the moment. These opportunities can be realized by focusing on bilateral relationships and respectful partnerships, Muslim initiative, and agreeing to disagree on contentious security issues involving other countries such as Iraq or Palestine. Informing people about aid in the areas in which America's strengths are acknowledged had a significant positive effect on the attitudes of focus group members. (The more favorable impressions among Moroccan women due to democracy assistance and in Indonesia after the outpouring of tsunami aid are pointers in this direction.) These gains could be enhanced by efforts to promote consultation and transparency in aid programs. There are also various possible aid projects, including support for English and science education, trade and investment missions, and media efforts, which could make a difference if undertaken as U.S. government, private corporate, or foundation initiatives.

Still, substantial efforts will be required to communicate more effectively. Turning information and initiatives into communications that are heard requires more actively engaging local media—including the controversial al-Jazeera—as well as paid advertising, effective spokespeople, and logos and labels on aid. Nongovernmental efforts to challenge the misconceptions common among focus group members about U.S. foreign policy, including those regarding Jewish influence, would also be helpful in breaking down barriers to communication in the Islamic world. Finally, effectively organizing governmental communications will require more research, coordination, country-level planning, piloting, and professionalism, sustained over several years.

INTRODUCTION

The United States can improve its image in the Muslim world. Focus group research in three key Islamic countries—Egypt, Morocco, and Indonesia—shows that the widely held view that nothing can be done about the spread of negative attitudes toward the United States among Muslims in the Middle East and Asia is incorrect. What we say and how we say it can make a difference. Despite the intensity of their anger, many Muslims appear open to new information and a different attitude from the United States. An effort to communicate and the right content for the dialogue can help to change their perceptions, even if it cannot vanquish anti-Americanism altogether.

Perceptions matter: most Muslims do not hate America for “who we are” or “what we do.” This study shows that they are angry at what they *perceive* America to do. Many of the focus group members once admired America and regret that their feelings have soured. They do not hate America’s freedom and wealth; they envy them. They do not project repressed rage at their governments onto ours; their views of America have worsened while their attitudes toward their own rulers have improved and their societies have grown freer. It is more accurate to say they hate America for what the country has done, but it is most accurate to say they are hostile to American policies as they perceive them. They are angered by what they have heard about Iraq, the war on terror, Palestine, and post–September 11 American views of Muslims, filtered by largely hostile television stations and print media. They are ignorant of U.S. aid programs that address national priorities they hold dear, despite massive increases in such aid in recent years. Ironically, when asked what they want from America, they request respect and aid—things America can provide.

The key to a new dialogue with the Muslim world is a humbler American perspective, based on respectful partnership and agreeing to disagree when necessary. To the focus group members, respect means listening to their views and respecting their countries’ autonomy. They want to modernize their economies and societies while strengthening moral and religious values in public and private life,

goals Americans understand. Partnership means supporting local initiatives for change. Muslims know their economic, educational, health, and legal systems need reform; they recognize America's strengths in these areas and welcome its help if no strings are attached. A young Jakarta woman spoke for many when she wrote, "Dear President Bush: Please help us with our economy, but let us manage our country!" Muslims will listen to what we say about their own lands, however, only if we can set aside contentious issues such as Iraq or Palestine. If our main interest in Islamic countries is in helping them reform internally, we must be able to tolerate disagreements over our actions elsewhere.

The focus groups demonstrate that Muslims view the United States more favorably when they learn about American aid. Women in Morocco are the only people in the study to say that America's message is women's rights, not force of arms. There, U.S. efforts to promote women's status and political participation have been particularly active. Likewise, U.S. tsunami relief has improved attitudes toward America in Indonesia and has created greater openness to information about it. The focus group results suggest that information about other aid programs can also make a strong impression.

Fortunately, we now have a window of opportunity to reach out to the Islamic world. Recent developments, including the Iraqi elections, renewed hopes for Israeli-Palestinian peace, mass mobilizations for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, and announcement of multi-candidate presidential elections in Egypt, as well as the tsunami relief effort, have improved the atmosphere. Even voices that have been critical of the Bush administration recognize that we "may be entering a time of unusually ripe opportunity for creative public diplomacy, when people who have generally been hostile to American policies might be willing to give an American message at least a listen."¹

In these circumstances, America needs to think anew about communicating with the Muslim world, and the second Bush administration appears aware of the importance of doing so. The need for better public diplomacy was recognized recently at the highest levels of the U.S. government. President George W. Bush

¹ Fred Kaplan, Slate.com, March 15, 2005.

said that “we need to work in a public diplomacy effort that explains our motives and explains our intentions”; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has pledged that “public diplomacy will be a top priority”; and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s Defense Science Board issued a report urging stronger public diplomacy.² The appointment of former presidential counselor Karen Hughes as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy also appears to be a sign of the administration’s seriousness on this subject. Our study aims to help the U.S. government and the private and nonprofit sectors understand and respond to the opportunities for a fresh start in America’s communications with the Muslim world.

Communicating more effectively in Muslim countries about America’s support for development and reform will require a commitment of substantial effort and resources. To reach their citizens, America should engage local and regional news media (including the controversial al-Jazeera, the news station with the largest audience) and purchase paid advertising. Initiatives by the American government and by private U.S. firms and foundations in the areas of education, economic growth, media, and other fields would also be well received. All this will take significant amounts of money and institutional resources for an extended period.

Of course, there are limits to even the best communications efforts, and attitudes will continue to be influenced by events, but this does not mean that Muslim perceptions of the United States can change only with drastic policy changes toward Iraq or Palestine or major improvements there. Developments there will count, but so will America’s words and tone. Muslims care about what happens elsewhere in the Islamic world, but the focus groups remind us that America’s relationship with their own countries matters too. To assume that perceptions of America cannot change until all major policy problems are resolved would be to postpone indefinitely any attempts to improve communications. Although a sea change in attitudes may be beyond our reach, this study suggests that significant progress can be made in changing Muslim minds about America.

This report differs from other recent studies on American public diplomacy toward the Muslim world because it deals with the substance of communications

² *Washington Post*, January 16, 2005; *New York Times*, January 18, 2005.

rather than its organization. Since September 11, 2001, a dozen publications on U.S. public diplomacy have appeared, including two reports from Independent Task Forces formed by the Council on Foreign Relations and others from leading research bodies.³ These writings make major recommendations on institutional reform and financial support of public diplomacy, most of which remain to be implemented. Unlike any of these reports, this study examined in detail the content of communications and used research to test alternative ideas and communication approaches.

The point of departure for this study is the well-known fact that the image of the United States has deteriorated significantly abroad since 2001, particularly in the Muslim world. The most authoritative polling on the subject, published by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, showed that Muslim countries were the one set of states in which perceptions of America were mostly unfavorable even before the 2003 Iraq war.⁴ While views of the United States recovered from prewar lows in many other countries, Uncle Sam had no postwar bounce in the Muslim world. Instead, perceptions there worsened after the invasion and again last year.⁵ The

³*Finding America's Voice: A Strategy for Reinvigorating U.S. Public Diplomacy*, Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, September 2003); *Public Diplomacy: A Strategy for Reform*, Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, July 2002); *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, September 2004); Hady Amr, *The Need to Communicate: How to Improve U.S. Public Diplomacy with the Arab World* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, January 2004); *Rebuilding Public Diplomacy through a Reformed Structure and Additional Resources* (Washington, DC: U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2002); *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World* ("The Djerejian Report"), Report of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, submitted to the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives (October 1, 2003); *How to Reinvigorate U.S. Public Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, April 2003); *Reclaiming America's Voice Overseas* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, May 2003); *Strengthening U.S.-Muslim Communications* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of the Presidency, July 2003); and *U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Expands Efforts but Faces Significant Challenges*, Report of the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) to the Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives (Washington, DC: GAO, September 2003).

⁴ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *What the World Thinks in 2002* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2002).

most recent polls by Pew and Zogby show that large majorities of Moroccans, Egyptians, and Indonesians viewed the United States unfavorably in 2004.⁶

Americans need to understand why we are viewed with suspicion and hostility by such large proportions of Muslims despite our good intentions and desire to promote democratization and development. The situation in the Islamic world is unlike that in the former communist countries, where citizens who opposed their own regimes saw that the United States was on their side. For decades in the Middle East and Asia, Washington was on the side of the rulers, not the ruled. The result, at present, is that many people in Muslim countries are not willing to give America the benefit of the doubt. Indeed, the unparalleled U.S. power to promote or effect change is itself a source of suspicion to some Muslims, who worry about our motives because we are powerful. These and other factors make it difficult, yet imperative, for the United States to find ways to establish a new and more fruitful dialogue with people in the Muslim world.

To explore these issues, the Council on Foreign Relations commissioned Charney Research to conduct twelve focus groups with citizens eighteen years of age and older in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia from December 1 to December 14, 2004. These countries were chosen for very specific reasons: Morocco's role as a key moderate American ally; Egypt's stature as the largest Arab country; and Indonesia's position as the largest Muslim country and its pivotal role in Asia. The two-hour, open-ended focus group discussions allowed wider probing and deeper testing of alternative messages than would have been possible with opinion polls. Four groups were held in each of three cities, Casablanca, Cairo, and Jakarta. In each, there were two groups of university graduates, ages 20–30, and two groups of 40- to 60-year-old professionals, with separate men's and women's groups at each

⁵ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Views of a Changing World* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, June 2003); Pew Global Attitudes Project, *A Year after Iraq War, Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, March 2004).

⁶ Partial findings from the Zogby polls are available in Shibley Telhami, *A View from the Arab World: A Survey in Five Countries* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, March 2003), and Zogby International, *Impressions of America 2004* (Washington, DC: Arab American Institute, 2004).

age level. The educated elite were chosen as the most politically influential and articulate group, whose support is vital for U.S.-backed reforms.⁷ Two more groups were held in Jakarta on January 25–26, 2005, to gauge the impact of tsunami relief efforts on attitudes. All the groups were run by local professional moderators in local languages. For the most part, participants spoke freely and frankly. Methodological details can be found in the Appendix of this report.

This report presents the findings of those focus groups and recommendations based on this analysis. The first section examines the mood and aspirations of the people in the three countries and how these shape their desires for foreign assistance and their attitudes toward Islamic fundamentalism. The second part explores current attitudes toward America and the factors that have changed them. The final part recommends a new approach to communication with the Islamic world.

This report does not address some important issues concerning U.S. relations with the Muslim world. One is overall U.S. policy toward Islamic countries. Obviously, America's deeds must match its words. Although it was assumed and proposed that American efforts to support reform and growth in Muslim lands would be built further, the details of U.S. policy regarding such efforts was well beyond the scope of this study. This subject is being thoroughly addressed by the Council on Foreign Relations's Independent Task Force on U.S. Policy toward Reform in the Arab World, the report of which should be read in conjunction with this one.⁸ Another important topic in U.S.-Muslim relations is how people and institutions in this country view and treat people from Muslim countries. Communication is a two-way street, and how American media, institutions, and people behave toward Muslims will influence perceptions of America. Sadly, that issue, too, lies beyond the scope of this work.

⁷ Other surveys, such as the Pew polls cited above, suggest that the views of less-educated citizens of those countries would be similar to but less developed than those of the university educated.

⁸ Report of an Independent Task Force on Reform in the Arab World (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, forthcoming).

MOOD AND ASPIRATIONS: MOROCCO, EGYPT, INDONESIA

A CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

The focus group participants in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia are cautiously hopeful that their countries are headed in the right direction. This is mainly due to new leadership and greater openness in all three countries, along with economic reforms in Egypt and Morocco and the new president's anticorruption stance in Indonesia.

Moroccans enjoy greater political freedom and transparency under King Mohammed VI, who ascended the throne in 1999, and they hope for economic progress under Driss Jettou's recently named government. "For me, the country is on the right track, because of the new policy, a young king, a young government," said a young Moroccan man. Another added, "Before, people could not speak out on some issues. Now, everybody is free to express his views and talk about things on TV and in newspapers." Women spoke of gaining rights. An older Moroccan woman said, "I think Morocco is not too healthy, but there are lots of improvements, mainly in matters related to women. The way of life has changed a great deal and women have more rights." Prime Minister Driss Jettou also is popular; participants saw him as "serious," "hard-working," and "competent." His government's economic reform plans reinforced these perceptions. One young Moroccan man commented, "The free trade agreement between Morocco and European countries [is good]. Reforms are underway to make enterprises healthy and profitable." Although focus group members spoke freely, they noted that some Moroccans remain fearful. "The kind of discussion we are having is rare in Morocco, because the majority of people are afraid of discussing these issues," said one young man.

Egyptians, too, were encouraged by the arrival of a new prime minister, Ahmed Nazif, seen as an honest modernizer. The focus groups were positive, if skeptical, about him:

[He's] better than the one before him. I hope he stays *nazif* [clean]. (older Egyptian man)

I really like this new government. Most of the people in it are of the right age, most of them are qualified, and they have worked in various corporations. (older Egyptian man)

It's still not clear concerning him, but I think he's taking the right path. (older Egyptian woman)

Recent improvements in the Egyptian economy have also registered:

Economically they've begun to go the right way. That's backed by the fact that exchange rates are stabilizing. You can find foreign currency any time; the price of the dollar is starting to decrease. (older Egyptian woman)

Economic conditions are moving forward in Egypt. They are opening new things and import and export products. (young Egyptian man)

Egypt, however, was the country where focus group members were the most nervous:

It's not normal that we as Egyptians can talk about these things [politics and government]. (older Egyptian woman)

They can arrest us [for answering your questions]. Can you walk in the street and say anything bad about the president? (young Egyptian woman)

Although they mentioned their fears, none of the participants walked out, and most spoke their minds, rarely falling into silence or stereotyped, "safe" replies.

Indonesia's first directly elected president, Susilo Bambang Yudhono, has inspired particularly strong hopes since taking office late last year, due to his charisma, appointments, and moves against corruption. His intelligence ("first in his class," "smart guy") and ability to connect ("likes sports, singing," "more open") were noted. Women liked his looks, young men his brawn, military background, and firmness. A few thought him too cautious, but his nominees and anticorruption measures impressed many:

Some people [he's appointed] are appropriate for their positions. These good people are going to make things better in the future. (young Indonesian man)

I see some serious law enforcement activities. All newly appointed state officials have been asked to declare their assets. (older Indonesian woman)

The December tsunami, rather than crushing the optimism, actually encouraged it, because of the national unity engendered by the relief effort. "It creates solidarity among all people. It is a good start to rebuilding our country," said an older Jakarta woman. In the focus group discussions, Indonesians expressed no hesitation or fear. In a study that Charney Research did two years ago, participants still commented on their new democracy and freedoms, which date only from the 1998 fall of Suharto's dictatorship. Today they seem to take these reforms for granted.⁹

ECONOMIC CONCERNS: JOBLESSNESS AND INEQUALITY

Despite the improvements that Moroccans, Egyptians, and Indonesians noted in their countries' situations, they all said economic progress is too slow. "I think we are standing still; we don't go forward or backward, we are standing in the same place we were twenty years [ago]," a young Egyptian woman said. A young Moroccan woman stated, "[Morocco] is progressing, but very slowly." None of the Indonesians said that economic conditions were improving in their country, which has been slow to recover from its 1997–98 economic meltdown. "I think we're still stuck," said a young Jakarta man.

Unemployment was the principal economic complaint in the focus groups in all three countries, followed by inequality. The young people were particularly concerned about the dearth of jobs for university graduates like themselves:

⁹ *Indonesia: A Report on Public Opinion and the 2004 Elections* (Jakarta: Asia Foundation, 2003).

There is no chance to get a good job due to the large number [of jobless people]. Fresh graduates don't find appropriate jobs. Sometimes you can see a doctor and he is working as a cab driver. This isn't fair. (young Egyptian woman)

[Indonesia's biggest problem?] Unemployment. (young Indonesian man)

The issue of unemployment is serious. Recently there were some demonstrations in Rabat by university graduates [about joblessness]. (young Moroccan man)

Many Muslims were also concerned by the growing disparities in income and wealth they see in their countries, believing that growth benefits privileged and politically connected groups. A young Moroccan man noted, "It is always the same set of [well-off] people who benefit from economic improvements, but the rest do not." A young Indonesian woman simply said, "The money is flowing up to those on the higher levels. That is why rich people will never be poor in Indonesia." Focus group members associated these economic inequalities with increasing social tensions and crime.

Indonesia's debt to private and international financial institutions is a major issue for people there, who believe it hinders the country's economic recovery. A young woman noted that Indonesia has received loans of "trillions [of rupiah, the national currency] and you will have to pay the loan up to the seventh generation. A newborn baby has a debt of around 9 million rupiah [equivalent to U.S. \$950]." When asked about her fondest hope for the future of Indonesia, one older woman replied, "No [foreign] debt, please!"

PATHS TO PROGRESS: PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND OPEN ECONOMIES

Focus group members in all three countries knew that other countries' economies are growing more rapidly than their own, although their frames of reference differ. Moroccans look primarily to Tunisia and Turkey. Egyptians and Indonesians

principally think of the booming economies of China, India, and the Asian “tigers” (particularly Muslim Malaysia) as exemplars of growth.

Participants stressed two reasons for faster growth: better education and possessing a stronger work ethic. The contribution of education to economic growth was frequently noted:

[Tunisia has grown faster than Morocco because] education there is better than our education system. (young Moroccan man)

[Asia has grown because of] education. Here they take the test and forget [the subject] afterwards. (older Egyptian woman)

Any country that progressed [like India], it’s because of its people. If they are well educated and the country is taking care of them, it will progress. (young Egyptian man)

Besides education, Egyptians said the work ethic explained other countries’ success.

They want to work. We want things done for us. (older Egyptian woman)

“[Malaysians are] more disciplined, obeying the rules. (young Egyptian man)

Institutional factors—less government interference and corruption and better legal systems—were the second major set of reasons cited to explain fast-growing economies. Bureaucracy was seen as the scourge of development. “Before [we grow faster] we must loosen up a little on all the paperwork, like the MOUs [memoranda of understanding] and the notarized documents, and decrease the routine,” said a young Egyptian woman. The focus group members linked bureaucracy to corruption—and saw the rule of law as the answer:

The problem is in the bureaucracy, which causes high illegal costs so that the price of products is less competitive compared to other countries. (older Indonesian man)

The [fast-growing] countries have implemented and enforced their laws. We also have laws, but I think there is mistrust [of their enforcement]. When investors come to the country, they get afraid. (older Moroccan man)

Opening their economies to foreign trade and investment was seen as the right path by Moroccan and Indonesian focus group members, while Egyptians were more hesitant. Few participants cited economic openness, foreign investment, or privatization—without prompting—as reasons why the fastest-growing countries have enjoyed success. But when asked, most agreed that these strategies were the best choices for their countries' economies. Factors favoring a more open economy include both intensified international competition and the need to acquire new technology:

The openness is compulsory; in order to keep pace with the progress of the world, you should adapt to the new rules. (older Moroccan man)

For certain things like technology, we need their experience, for example like cars. We are able to make one ourselves, some of the components of the cars are made in Indonesia, but we still need their investment. (young Indonesian man)

There was also recognition that an open economy receiving investment is likely to offer better job prospects and to respond more to consumers' wishes and needs:

We have educated people with diplomas, but job opportunities are nonexistent. If [foreign] investors come they will open plants and offer jobs to our young generation. (older Moroccan woman)

Foreign investment has brought some positive results. Years ago, very few people had a phone line at home. But with privatization and foreign investment, now everybody can have a phone. (older Moroccan woman)

Support for an open economy is qualified by fears about competition in Morocco and runs counter to Egypt's socialist traditions. Respondents expressed considerable anxiety about competition from Asia, especially in Morocco. An older Moroccan man said, "The Chinese have invaded the market with their cheap

products, and this has had an impact on the market. It may lead businesses to close.” Egyptians, with a history of decades of state control beginning with President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalist regime, were the most hesitant about opening their economy. Recalling the failure of President Anwar Sadat’s *infitah* (opening) policy, an older Egyptian man noted, “We had taps that we made in the 1970s, but with Sadat’s opening policy these factories closed down.” Nostalgia for the old ways was felt by Egyptians of all ages. A young Cairo man said, “We need somebody like Nasser to put the country [back] together.”

PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE: ECONOMY AND EDUCATION FIRST

Across the board, the top priority of participants in the focus groups was faster economic development. Discussing their aspirations for their countries, people in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia expressed a desire for economic growth above all else. A young Moroccan man’s wish for the future was to “increase economic growth.” Indonesians’ hopes for their country included “a developed country,” “prosperous,” with “no poor people.” Almost every future goal they wished for was related to economic development:

If there is good economic development it will solve all the problems—health, electricity, employment, and industry. (older Egyptian man)

Economic growth and exporting [are] a must. If these are absent, there will be nothing in the economy for employment or anything else. (older Moroccan man)

The unmistakable desire is for their societies to continue to progress and modernize. No one wanted to turn back the clock to some Islamic past.

Better education is seen as the key to growth and development, at home as well as abroad:

My vision starts with education. If there will be competent educational institutions, it will help students to qualify, and economic growth will be the result. From there all sectors [of the society] will be touched. (young Moroccan man)

The country is like a huge building and its foundation is education. If we care for education we have a strong foundation, if we don't then the building will fall. (older Egyptian man)

Affordable education [is my hope for the future of Indonesia]. (young Indonesian woman)

Not a single man or woman in any of the fourteen focus groups expressed any wish to deny girls schooling or restrict women from social or economic life. In fact, strong support was voiced for universal education, including for girls. "Education is everyone's right," a young Indonesian woman remarked. A young Moroccan woman said, "It is the basic thing to do; it is very important."

Dissatisfaction with schooling was rife in all three countries, however. Morocco's educational system "is falling into the ditch," said one older Casablanca woman. A young Indonesian man said, "[Other developing countries] used to learn things from us; now we are behind in education." Education in Egypt is "a disgrace," said a young Cairo man, and "a failure," according to an older woman there. These examples could be multiplied many times over. Similar complaints about education were mentioned, including underfunded schools, large classes, and underpaid teachers; poor teacher training; lack of textbooks and instructional materials; and poor teaching about modern technology. Still, whatever the details, economic growth and education were clearly the most important priorities for people in all three countries—a finding confirmed by recent polls there.¹⁰

¹⁰ Jobs and education were the first and third domestic priorities cited in a Zogby poll in Morocco released by the Arab American Institute in December 2004. (Health care was the second.) A 2003 survey conducted in Indonesia by Charney Research showed that the economy was rated the country's biggest problem by far. *Democracy in Indonesia 2003* (Jakarta: Asia Foundation, 2003).

A MORAL ORDER: SAFETY, SECURITY, SERVICES, AND SOLIDARITY

Safety and security, public services and infrastructure, and moral decline and corruption form a second-tier set of concerns, which are linked in the public mind in Egypt, Indonesia, and Morocco. They are all seen as part of an orderly, well-run state and as rooted in declining moral values in the society and in the home.

Issues of public safety and public services were mentioned by some focus group participants. In Indonesia, hit in recent years by rising crime and Islamist terror, these problems received the most frequent mention. Terrorism was listed as one of Morocco's biggest problems by focus group members in Casablanca as well, in the wake of the May 2003 Casablanca bombings, which were attributed to al-Qaeda. Decaying public services and infrastructure—dirty streets, deterioration of roads and bridges, transportation problems, and inadequate water and electricity supplies—also concerned focus group members, especially in Egypt.

Focus group members also worried about the decay of public and private morality, which they saw as the foundation of terrorism, crime, disorder, and misgovernment:

Poverty, bombs everywhere, more young kids on the streets, more terrorists. We're notorious as a country with lots of terrorists, insecure. Human life is worthless now; you can kill someone for small change—500 rupiah. I think Indonesia's morality is degrading. (young Indonesian woman)

If someone has a conscience, he wouldn't steal even if he can't eat. Others, no matter how much you give them, they'll never have enough. (older Egyptian woman)

If we were a clean country, you wouldn't find someone throwing papers from the car's window. This is not a civilized image at all. (young Egyptian woman)

DPR [parliament] members fight each other. They have no shame. It shows a lack of morality among our representatives in parliament. (older Indonesian woman)

At a more personal level, they worried about the impact of immoral behavior, drugs, and corruption on their families and lives. Many also yearned for respect: young women for an end to harassment or violence against women, men for “harmonious [relations among] all classes—lower, middle, and upper,” in the words of a young Jakarta man.

Older participants in the focus groups missed the sense of solidarity they used to feel with their fellow citizens and wished for a return to a more traditional morality. “I want Morocco to be as it was in the 1950s, where people were helping each other, they were loving and caring. That love and solidarity has disappeared; now people are more materialistic,” said an older Casablanca woman. People like her did not oppose modernization or seek to re-establish yesterday’s world, but they sought to re-create order, harmony, and morality in today’s conditions.

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN ASSISTANCE

What Muslims want for their countries largely determines the help they desire from overseas. Improving growth rates and education were the top foreign aid needs cited by the focus group members. The reasons why assistance is necessary for growth were straightforward: the need for know-how and investment.

[Foreigners] can help with their knowledge and experience to improve our economic status, projects, and stuff. (older Egyptian woman)

We do not have money. (young Indonesian woman)

Similarly, the case for aid to education seemed self-evident, given the low quality and limited resources of national school systems:

[Foreign aid is needed] because education policy is terrible in Egypt. (young Egyptian man)

[We need help with education] because it's expensive in Indonesia. In remote areas, going to school is difficult. (young Indonesian woman)

Next in priority came health care and birth control. The case for health care assistance was based on the technical lag and large needs (especially for birth control) in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia.

Concerning medicine, we're not as good as countries abroad. When we fail to cure any case, it's sent abroad! (older Egyptian woman)

[Foreign aid is needed for] birth control. Why? Because we are very far behind as far as tools and techniques are concerned. (older Moroccan man)

These findings were similar to those of recent polling regarding priorities for U.S. aid.¹¹

Some Muslims wanted assistance in improving their countries' legal systems and democratic and electoral institutions. Together, these democracy and governance issues ranked almost as high as health care did among aid priorities.

We need to learn how other countries enforce their law. We should take the experience of other countries as examples. (older Indonesian woman)

I chose democratic elections, because we have no previous experience with elections, so I was to learn that from them. Teach us democracy and free elections. (older Moroccan woman)

Infrastructure came next on the list, reflecting its underdevelopment and neglect. “[We need help because] we do not have good roads. You find villages without electricity or water supply,” said an older Moroccan man.

But aid on sensitive issues—law reform, democracy, or women's rights—raised hackles for some. Women's rights came lowest as foreign aid needs, for religious reasons.

¹¹ The Arab American Institute poll cited above also found that the top three priorities for U.S. aid in Morocco were economic growth, education, and health care.

Law enforcement is very important, but how can a foreign party assist us with our law? (older Indonesian woman)

The last thing I want [from foreign aid] is democracy; democracy comes from within us. (older Egyptian man)

They should not interfere in women's affairs; Islam deals better with women's rights. (older Moroccan woman)

Thus, Muslims' views on foreign aid are shaped by their broader social goals, but tempered by their concern for the sovereignty of their countries.

BETTER GOVERNANCE REQUIRES DEMOCRACY

Egyptians, Moroccans, and Indonesians want more accountability and genuine choice in their political systems. An older Indonesian man spoke for many when he asked, "Is it possible to have transparency in politics, so that we can assess how the system works?" An older Egyptian woman said, "I wish we could have elections periodically, like foreign countries do, [multi-candidate] presidential elections, not [with] only one man [running]. There must be some change."

Focus group members lacked confidence in government institutions in all three countries, considering them unresponsive, inept, and corrupt. Despite their hopes about new leaders and reforms, the participants felt that the authorities did not listen to the people or run the administration properly.

There's no connection between the people and the decision-maker. (older Egyptian woman)

I am fifty years old and I haven't [voted]. I can't go vote for a member of the public council, I don't trust him at all! He does nothing for me! (older Egyptian man)

We have a credibility crisis [in government] which needs to be improved urgently. (older Indonesian woman)

[The country's problems include] bad management of the administration and abuse of power. (older Moroccan man)

There is a perception that elites are entrenched, due in part to unfair electoral processes, and that this perpetuates incompetence and corruption:

It is always the same figures who have the [positions of the] highest power. (young Moroccan woman)

When you talk about politics you mean the elections, and how vagabonds got onto the public council and the good people failed in the elections, the bribes and all. It all has to change! If it doesn't, this nation will explode. (older Egyptian man)

Indeed, despite the fears they voiced in the focus groups about the authorities, Egyptians were rather hard on their 76-year-old president, Hosni Mubarak, who has ruled for twenty-five years and, at the time when the focus groups met, appeared likely to run again as the sole presidential candidate. (In February 2005, Mubarak announced that opposition candidates could participate in the election.) Many made anodyne or sardonic comments ("My mother doesn't want me to say bad things about him"), while others sang his praises rather insincerely ("Our father and he is *so* clever!"). But a number were quite harsh, offering comments such as "dictator" and "he and his sons have eaten Egypt." Others wanted to criticize him but were afraid. When Mubarak's name was mentioned, one young man made a gesture as if he was being choked and could not speak.

Free elections were seen as a way to obtain more responsive and popular leaders:

If elections are transparent and genuine, the one who deserves to win and who gains the trust of voters will win. (older Moroccan woman)

For me, elections are the base. If there are real elections, we will not face problems with power, water or health. We will choose the right persons for the right positions. (young Moroccan woman)

Democracy means elections, this way we will have the right to choose our leaders who can lead us to the right path, also the growth in our economic

state will help us to develop our civilization and it will offer job opportunities to the fresh graduate who can't find jobs until now. (young Egyptian woman)

If I know that my vote has a meaning and an effect, surely I'll go to the elections and then we could get the people we need that will—to an extent—be useful. (older Egyptian man)

Free elections in Indonesia were mentioned by people there as the reason for the hope placed in their new president. “I think we trust the government because it was chosen by the Indonesian people, right? I think the changes are going to be more significant now than before with the old government,” said a young Jakarta man.

The commitment among focus group members to free elections was so strong that they insisted that such elections not be delayed even though Islamists might win:

The meaning of election is choice and choice is made by free will. When we respect the will of the people, we respect ourselves. If [Islamists] win, the voters will see the result. If they are not happy with their performance, in the next elections, they will make a new choice. (older Moroccan man)

What's the problem [if an Islamic party gets elected]? This is the point of free elections, these elections are beautiful, and it's the people's opinion! (older Egyptian woman)

Muslims also expressed a strong desire to strengthen the rule of law in their countries and to reduce corruption in their governments. They were particularly angry at the impunity of leading figures involved in corrupt practices.

They do not punish the high officials they've caught who have been corrupted, they let them flee the country or leave them free. We don't have that feeling of responsibility or of nationalism. Everyone looks out for his own interest and that's it. (older Moroccan woman)

The law is not equitable yet. For example, a chicken robber is punished heavily but a big corruptor does not get an appropriate verdict for what they did. (young Indonesian woman)

One older Indonesian woman summed up the general feeling when she said, “Corruption is the most important thing to be tackled.”

Thus, the functional requirements of better governance put democratic reforms high on the agenda in Egypt, Morocco, and Indonesia, even if citizens did not list “democracy” as their country’s biggest problem. Public demands focused on improving the functioning of the state (the electoral and legal systems) instead of “democracy” per se. Yet the desire for choice and legality was so strong that most participants supported completely free elections—even at the risk that an Islamist party they did not favor might win. Thus, in Muslim lands the public’s desire for better governance—popular and legal accountability through free elections and the rule of law—amounts to a demand for democracy.

ISLAM AND POLITICS: MORALISTIC BUT MODERATE

A role for Islam in politics is fairly attractive to the focus group members in all three countries, who tend to see it as a moralizing force:

If we go by the Islamic religion, politics will be better, because politics is one of the bases we learn from the Islamic religion. (young Egyptian woman)

The Koran covers everything: law, social issues, politics, normal dealings, everything is in it. Islam must be interpreted better and should be more respected. (young Moroccan woman)

Of course, these benign views assume that Islamic politics will be a nonviolent, moderate, and moral force, rather than one which is intolerant or extreme:

The right kind of Islam doesn’t like violence. (older Indonesian woman)

Islam is needed to give morality to politics. That is what the Islamic world wants and longs for. [But] when we go to Saudi Arabia, [where strict Wahabi Islam dominates], we find that human rights are violated. (older Moroccan man)

We believe in *sharia* [Islamic law], but all we want is justice in the country and to have the right to speak. To have an extremist in the government or the public council is totally wrong, because extremism has a type of violence. (older Egyptian man)

Notably absent from the focus groups' discussions were calls for an Islamic state or replacing existing law and courts with *sharia* institutions.¹²

Iranian-style theocracy is an unattractive political model for educated Muslims in Indonesia, Egypt, and Morocco. When Iran was mentioned, women thought "closed in on itself," "subjugated," "veil," "oppressed," "sadness," and "terrorism," while men said "constraint," "extremism," "war," "hard-line Muslims," and "troubles." The main view was that Iran has been held back by the excessive influence of religion on politics.

You never feel it's an important country. In the days of the shah, Iran was very beautiful, it was progressing. I wished that it would improve more with Islam, but what a loss, it halted. (older Egyptian woman)

[Iran is] a [potentially] rich country which cannot get rich. It has abundant oil, but the government is not good. (young Indonesian woman)

Not one participant suggested following Iran's example, and few made positive references.

Yet while they did not wish to emulate Iran, most focus group members scoffed at the idea that an elected government led by an Islamic party would violate human rights. They assumed that an Islamic democracy would be tolerant and moderate:

Islam is not a religion of dictatorship, not terrorism. It is grounded and moral, it is not something immoral. (young Moroccan woman)

If the government is ruled by an Islamic party, I think it's only going to change the nuances, but it won't mean that we are not allowed to have churches or temples. (older Indonesian man)

¹² This view of Islamic politics as moralizing and moderate rather than oriented toward an Islamic state is similar to the findings in the previous Indonesia polling by Charney Research (*Democracy in Indonesia 2003*).

In addition to moderation, religious pluralism in Egypt and Indonesia was seen as a factor restraining Islamic government and as a tradition that Islamic societies must uphold.

Some participants in the discussions, however, were anxious about the idea of an Islamic government, fearing that it would prove intolerant and impose Islamic rules:

The religious community teaches people how to be prejudiced and they are using them. (young Egyptian man)

They will change the law to Islamic law, they will close the discotheques, [and] the decisions will be made based on Islamic law. (young Indonesian man)

These people wanted to separate religion and politics. This view was most common in Morocco, where the French tradition of separating church and state still has an influence. A young Casablanca man said, “I think the idea [of separation] is followed by France. I think that secularism is a model for development that must be followed in Morocco.”

PERCEPTIONS OF ISLAMISTS

Despite their hopes for Islamic influence on politics, focus group members gave little support to local Islamist leaders in Morocco and Egypt and only moderate sympathy in Indonesia.

In Morocco, several participants confused Abdeslam Yacine, leader of the largest local Islamist group, al-Adl Wah Ihsane, with the late Palestinian Hamas leader Ahmed Yacine, killed by an Israeli last year. “We don’t know much about him,” said an older woman. A few alluded to his learning and stature (“teacher,” “respected”). Among those who offered opinions, some were wary or anxious. Many thought him an extremist.

He has some radical ideas that the Moroccan government does not wish to have spread. (young Moroccan Man)

He goes beyond the limits; he has even touched the person of the king. (young Moroccan man)

Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Akef was even less well known in Cairo, where almost none of the participants knew his name. Their affect and body language when he was mentioned gave the impression of genuine puzzlement, not fear.¹³ In contrast, Abubakir Bashir, a controversial figure in Indonesia, drew mixed reactions in Jakarta. Accused of being the spiritual leader of the al-Qaeda affiliate responsible for the deadly bombings in Bali and Jakarta in the past three years, he was awaiting retrial on terrorism charges at the time the focus groups met. Many associated him with violence or extremism (“terrorist,” “hard-line,” “bomb,” “uses religion as cover”). But roughly as many people were sympathetic, seeing him as a “religious person” who is a “victim” or “scapegoat” facing unfounded charges. (One claimed Bashir was the object of an American vendetta.) A similar mix of views was expressed about him in another study conducted two years ago.¹⁴

In contrast to local Islamists, Osama bin Laden received rock-star reviews from many young Muslims. “He is a good man [who] fights for his beliefs,” said one young Egyptian woman. Other associations included “very clever,” “cunning,” “a good businessman,” “intellectual,” “idealistic,” “courageous,” and “hero.” Many dismissed his ties to terrorism as American propaganda, describing him as a “victim of false accusation” and “a name invented by the United States to justify its acts.” Some, however, particularly women and older people in Morocco and Indonesia, were more critical, terming him a “terrorist,” a “world criminal,” and a “coward” who “gives Muslims a bad image.”

¹³ The relative obscurity of the Islamist leaders in Morocco and Egypt, reflecting their low profile in local state-dominated media, does not render their movements insignificant, however. Yacine’s group mobilized 50,000 marchers from around Morocco in the capital, Rabat, for an anti-American protest on November 28, 2004. *Le Journal* (Casablanca), December 4, 2004. Likewise, the Brotherhood played a role in channeling the mass protests in Cairo in 2003. Paul Schemm, “Egypt Struggles to Control Anti-War Protests,” Merip Reports Online, March 31, 2003.

¹⁴ *Indonesia: A Report on Public Opinion and the 2004 Elections.*

Bin Laden's appeal was as an outlet for anti-American frustration, much more than for Islamic fundamentalist ideology: he "put America in its place." In the focus groups, no one said they liked bin Laden because they wanted a Taliban-style state or to impose Islamic law. Instead, they admired his fortitude and skill against the dominant world power.

Cool because he could destroy the World Trade Center. Bush's pride was hurt. (young Indonesian woman)

A man who stands for idealism, fighting for his pride, his religion. He might feel intruded upon and America has been so arrogant. (young Indonesian woman)

A man who threatens America. [That] is a good thing. (young Moroccan man)

These comments show that bin Ladenism is more about America than about Islam.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Today there are noteworthy parallels in the situations and aspirations of people in Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia, despite the distances between and differences among them. All participants reported political progress, but substantial economic discontent remains. There was a clear consensus among focus group members on the need to modernize, in terms of the economy, education, law, and work discipline, drawing on foreign aid and capital to meet these goals. These people want to join the global economy—not reject it. Yet while there was no desire to go backward or keep girls and women at home, there was a wish to reassert Islamic values, strengthen social order, and improve the morality of public and private life.

¹⁵ Andrew Kohut has stated that in Pew polling as well, pro-bin Laden sentiment is closely associated with anti-U.S. feeling.

This desire produced strong support for electoral and legal reform as well as a view that Islam is needed to make political life more ethical. Yet it does not translate into backing for Islamic fundamentalists, at least among these educated participants, who regard Iranian-style theocracy as an anti-model. (Osama bin Laden remains, however, a Che Guevara–like anti-American icon to many.) These views formed the backdrop against which the focus group members saw the world in general and America in particular.

ATTITUDES AND ANTAGONISMS TOWARD AMERICA

CURRENT ATTITUDES: AMBIVALENCE COLORED BY HOSTILITY

Egyptian, Indonesian, and Moroccan focus group members had mixed feelings about the United States. They hated America, but they loved it, too, even if recent years had accentuated their hostility.

I love it as a country but I hate their politics. (young Egyptian woman)

The people are nice but not the government. (young Indonesian woman)

America is like this great guy who every once in a while does something immature and you begin to hate him. (older Egyptian woman)

But participants also recognized that they need what America offers and have to deal with it. As a young Indonesian woman put it, “Despite all the drawbacks, we need them.”

Top of Mind: Anger at Government, Respect for Society

Anger at U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. government dominated immediate reactions to America. Spontaneous “top-of-mind” reactions were hostile, focused on politics and war.

Violence. (older Moroccan woman)

Interferers, especially in developing countries. (young Indonesian man)

The policy against Arabs, it’s clear to everyone that we’re being dealt with differently. (older Egyptian woman)

There were also some negative associations with American people and culture, such as “individualism and egocentrism” and “pornography.”

Spontaneous responses to the United States were angriest in Egypt. Among educated, otherwise polite young women, reactions to the mention of America included “Go to hell,” “I hope God will destroy them,” and “God will give America its share of sorrow and humiliation and disgrace.” The other Cairo focus groups were also very negative.

But reflecting their contradictory feelings, Moroccans, Indonesians, and Egyptians also immediately thought of aspects of American society that they liked, including its economy, dynamism, and technology:

Their economy, career opportunities, the know-how, innovation. (young Moroccan man)

They have consumer products that make life easy. (young Moroccan woman)

The people, the science, the development, the civilization. (older Egyptian man)

Thus, at the outset, U.S. positives registered, but negatives predominated.

Resentment toward American Power and President Bush

A generalized resentment and hostility toward the power of the United States was palpable in all the focus groups. Spontaneous associations included “power,” “world police,” “sophisticated weapons,” “arrogance,” “domination,” “blood,” “cowboy,” and “greed.” Fear of American domination was a leitmotif throughout the discussions:

They want to dominate the world by any means. (young Moroccan woman)

[America] acts like a dictator. (older Indonesian woman)

They do whatever they like without thinking about other countries. (young Moroccan woman)

It supports us, but we can't say or do anything to them if they hurt us. It's as if someone gives you food and then shushes you whenever you try to express your opinion. (young Egyptian woman)

The sense that American power is used without respect for the wishes of people in Muslim countries was shared across all three countries, if less intensely by the old and women.

When the focus groups were asked, "If the United States were an animal, what sort of animal would it be?" the results were mostly aggressive and predatory. America was compared most often to a lion ("ferocious," "uses force to get what he wants"). Other comparisons were to a fox ("smart, manipulative"), spider ("hands everywhere"), cobra ("invades calmly"), pig ("never satisfied, eats a lot"), and dinosaur ("large but stupid and will die off"). The American traits now uppermost in Muslim minds are not favorable.

Views of President Bush were very negative: not one member in any focus group had a good word for him. The milder critics called him "selfish," "rude," "ignorant," or a "trouble-maker" who "mixed politics with religion." Others linked him to violence: "bombers," "war," "vengeance," and "massacres." The angriest called him "an enemy of Arabs and Muslims," "terrorist," "evil," "Satan," and "horror itself." His motives were seen as self-aggrandizement ("wants to rule the world"), serving oil interests ("controlled by people who want Iraqi oil"), and aiding Israel ("Sharon's brother"). Still, a few said they would work with Bush if it helped their country. "It's more about our good; if his policies [are] with us, we're with him" said an older Egyptian woman.

American People and Firms: Emergent Hostility

Hostility toward the U.S. government and leadership is starting to spill over into anger at Americans as people as well. In the past, Muslims distinguished between the U.S. government and the American people, and many focus group members still did so:

We are not talking about American people, individuals; we are talking about the American government and politicians. (young Moroccan woman)

The American people are not the American government. (older Moroccan man)

Many people, however, were hostile to Americans, calling them ignorant and ethnocentric:

They know nothing of other countries. (young Egyptian woman)

I think Americans respect their own people highly, but they are less respectful of non-Americans. (older Indonesian man)

A few were angry at Americans for reelecting President Bush; others called Americans “disrespectful” or “selfish.” These are signs of hostility spreading from government to people, a point also noted in recent polls.¹⁶

As with the American people, Muslims have distinguished between the U.S. government and American firms. Many participants continued to distinguish between them and voiced their attraction to U.S. brands. An older Indonesian woman said, “[The] products are very good. Also expensive, but the quality is good.” Young Indonesian men called America “a trendsetter,” associated with brands and icons such as McDonald’s, Coke, and Superman. Coke has a particularly rich image: it is liked for its taste and refreshing qualities. (“I prefer a Coke to tea or coffee, or any other type of drink,” said a young Moroccan woman.) The economic impact of Coke is appreciated (“It has employed people, many families are living on it,” said an older Moroccan man), and its corporate philanthropy is also noted (“It has helped many people and participated in many charitable activities,” says an older Egyptian woman).

¹⁶ The May 2003 Pew poll found that 60 percent of Egyptians saw Americans unfavorably, while the share of Moroccans who felt that way rose from 38 percent in 2003 to 56 percent in 2004. In Indonesia, the proportion hostile to Americans grew from 32 percent in 2002 to 44 percent in 2003. An Indonesia poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland (www.pipa.org) found that 55 percent said Bush’s re-election made them feel worse toward the American people.

Yet negative opinions of the United States are taking a toll on American companies, brands, and products as well, especially among young Muslims. Many made hostile references to the American origins of Coke and McDonald's or were reluctant to buy from them as a result. "[Coca-Cola?] What comes to my mind is George Bush," said a young Indonesian man. "I hate [McDonald's] because it is American," a young Egyptian man reported. When an older Moroccan woman heard "Coke," her reaction was, "Forbidden." Informal boycotts of U.S. fast food and consumer products seemed common, particularly in Egypt. A few spoke of "refusing" or "avoiding" Coke and McDonald's for political reasons, despite liking them:

I love U.S. products but it's not right to use them. (young Egyptian woman)

I love to eat [at McDonald's] but I stopped after what happened in Palestine. (young Egyptian woman)

These findings are consistent with surveys and press reports showing growing support for boycotts of American consumer products in the countries in this study.¹⁷

Economy, Education, Institutions and Ethics: Grudging Admiration

When asked what they liked about the United States, participants spoke of America's traditional strengths—its economy, know-how, institutions, and work ethic. Yet their admiration frequently was reluctant or lukewarm. Often, it was more a grudging concession about an adversary or a neutral observation than an expression of warmth.

Economic, technological, and educational leadership topped America's strengths:

¹⁷ Sizable proportions of Moroccans (19 percent) and Indonesians (23 percent) said in the 2003 Pew poll that they would consider boycotting U.S. goods. Unpublished research conducted by Charney Research in 2003 in Indonesia also found support for boycotts of American goods among young, educated Indonesians. These attitudes are having an impact: U.S. firms reportedly lost 20 to 30 percent of sales in Egypt after the invasion of Iraq. Gihan Shahine. "Put on Your Jeans and Hate America," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, June 12–18, 2003.

It has become the world center because the economy is strong and stable.
(young Indonesian woman)

If you want to talk about industrial and technological progress, we'll tell you [America is] wonderful. (older Egyptian woman)

Good education system, starting from kindergarten, we are imitating America. (young Indonesian woman)

Sometimes ambivalence surfaced in sardonic compliments: an older Indonesian man remarked, "I like their products. Their weaponry is very advanced."¹⁸ Nonetheless, respect for America's productivity, creativity, and educational system remains real.

The second major positive theme concerned American institutions and ethics: the rule of law, good management, honesty, and human rights.

We hate its arrogance, but like the positive aspects. It is more highly developed and [has] good management. The law is enforced [there]. They respect women. (older Indonesian woman)

They obey the rules compared to our people, who usually ignore rules. (young Indonesian man)

Their laws also respect human rights. Here, on the contrary, they put you in a cell and humiliate you. (young Egyptian woman)

For the focus groups, America's assets include an economy, education system, institutions, and values that promote innovation, hard work, and honesty. These are also the reasons they gave for other countries' faster growth and the areas where they welcomed foreign aid.

American Popular Culture: Of Two Minds

Mixed feelings were voiced about American popular culture, styles, and films.

¹⁸ The somewhat grudging compliments paid to America's economy and technology mirror the Zogby findings of a growing ratio of unfavorable to favorable comments on these topics among Arabs between 2002 and 2004 (*Impressions of America 2004*).

Positive feelings were associated with American culture, which was seen as up-to-date and stylish. Young Moroccan women rattled off American brand names they liked (Coke, Tide, et al.). Older Indonesian men referred to products and movies: “blue jeans, clothing, American movies—Hollywood is number one.” Movies particularly influenced the participants’ images of America, because they show both good and bad aspects of American society:

Movies show their life, how they work, think, and raise their families.
(young Egyptian woman)

They also made movies about their faults and defects. (young Egyptian woman)

American directors’ technical skills also impressed them, with one person commenting, “I like the special effects!”

Yet negative images of American popular culture as violent, obscene, and contrary to Islam were also abundant in the focus groups. Many Muslims worried that the worst elements of American culture were being absorbed by their children. There were some complaints about American styles of dress and behavior:

American culture is very hedonistic, especially American teenagers. Our youngsters imitate them. It’s very bad. (older Indonesian woman, post-tsunami)

There are some clothes that I as an Eastern man cannot accept that my daughter goes out wearing. (older Egyptian man)

Because of their powerful influence, American movies came in for particular criticism as being lewd and harmful:

Sadly, those who get American movies see either sex or horror movies. This is the reason why we have an increase in violence here. (older Egyptian man)

I don’t like the violence [of American movies], they’re not good for children. (older Indonesian woman)

Yet despite everything, Hollywood's siren song remains strong. An older Moroccan man remarked, "Who would skip an American film to watch a French one? None of us."

Alienation Runs Deep

The group discussions provided some indications of the depth of Muslim alienation from America in Egypt, Indonesia, and Morocco.

As the conversations progressed, participants' anger toward America grew so heated that many said they were not interested in visiting the country. Previous research showed that many Muslims, even if critical of the United States, wanted to see it for themselves.¹⁹ For some participants, this had changed:

Before, everybody wanted to go to the U.S., but now people have changed their views. (older Moroccan man)

I personally am against visiting the U.S. at this time. Why? Because the Arab is looked down upon by the Americans and is looked [at] as a terrorist. (young Egyptian man)

Even many of those who would like to go to America were lukewarm in their sentiments.

Well, I'd go. I mean, why not? (older Egyptian woman)

Just to be a tourist, walking around. (older Indonesian man)

It is uncertain whether these sentiments presage a drop in the number of Muslims who will come to America as tourists, students, business partners, or exchange participants, though they are a worrying sign. What they clearly do show is the depth of alienation from America and the weakening of its attractiveness to the Muslim world.

¹⁹ Zogby, *Impressions of America 2004*.

Indeed, many were so hostile that they claimed to welcome the idea of a U.S. withdrawal from the Muslim world, especially of military activity. To gauge the intensity of alienation from America, focus group members were asked their reaction to a total American withdrawal—political, economic, and military.²⁰ Quite a few reacted positively. In the wake of the Iraq war, the desire for U.S. military withdrawal is particularly strong.

The world would be beautiful [if America withdrew from Muslim countries]. At least we won't see as many casualties as now. (older Indonesian man)

That would be better. We'd feel safer. If America goes away, it would surely be better. (older Egyptian woman)

While pro-withdrawal comments tended to focus on the military aspects, economic nationalism and pan-Arab tendencies also led some participants to favor it. One young Egyptian man remarked, "We will feel safe and secure [if America withdraws]. We should unite the Arab nation to be stronger." Some assumed their countries could turn to other sources of aid, notably the European Union. A young woman in Jakarta said, "It will not be a problem. European countries can help us if necessary."

But some participants were aghast at the idea of losing American help:

I think it will be a catastrophe for [Muslim] countries. (young Moroccan man)

We live on the American aid, we can't live without it. (young Egyptian woman)

While some do not share these sentiments, the fact that many Muslims claim they no longer want to visit America or support an American presence is worrying.

²⁰ The question was, "Some people want the United States to get out of the Muslim world—to stop trying to speed up political, educational, or economic reform, increase trade and investment, and withdraw military aid and bases. If you imagine this happening, how would you feel about it?"

This may be more spite than serious thinking—but it is indeed a sign they are very angry at America.

Demographic Differences Limited

Although there were some differences in focus group members' attitudes toward the United States by age, sex, or nationality, what is most noteworthy is the broad uniformity of opinion. Hostility is somewhat less intense among older focus groups, particularly older women. It is also less intense in Morocco and Indonesia than in Egypt. Yet there is a broad similarity in reactions, complaints, and positives regarding America among participants in all three countries, of both sexes and all ages. These results are consistent with recent survey research that has suggested that hostility to America has become such a dominant perception that demographic differences on the topic are muted.²¹ The focus group results, like the surveys that preceded them, suggest that America has a serious image problem throughout the Islamic world, from North Africa to the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

“I USED TO LOVE AMERICA”: PATTERNS OF CHANGE

Things Were Better Before

In each country, focus group members said their previous views of the United States were positive, often warm. Their earliest memories of America were often of popular culture—cartoons for the young, movies for the older. Others involved U.S. leaders (John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan) and U.S. technology and power (the moon landing, the atom bomb).

Their views of America have turned negative lately, as they noted regretfully:

Before, people did not hate America. America was the country of freedom, development, and technology. (older Moroccan man)

²¹ Zogby, *Impressions of America 2004*.

Previously the image of the U.S. was good, but since Bush took office and declared war, we see it as arrogant and we hate it. (older Indonesian woman)

Before, we used to dream about visiting the U.S. and we liked its products. Now we no longer have that desire. Our view of the U.S. has changed for the worse. (young Moroccan woman)

It was like a dream, now it's a nightmare. (older Egyptian woman)

The growth of anger at the United States is a big change. These Muslim elites are disappointed not because they oppose America's ideals, but because they believe America has betrayed them. There is even a desire for things to go back as they were. An older Egyptian man said, "I hope it gets back to what it was. I used to love America."

Military Actions Generate Fear and Anger

The rejection of U.S. views on the war in Iraq was total in the focus groups. Muslims in Egypt, Morocco, and Indonesia felt the United States invaded on a false premise to further its own regional goals and were unhappy with everything they saw and heard about Iraq. Intensive and consistently negative coverage in Arab and Asian media has contributed to the belief that postwar Iraq is worse off than it was under Saddam Hussein²²:

They say they set up a democracy and removed the dictatorship, but it would be better to live peacefully under a dictatorial regime than to live under these conditions. In the Saddam era, there were fewer deaths than in these few months under U.S. occupation in Iraq. (young Moroccan woman)

[America] says one thing and does another. They claim they invaded Iraq to help. But if we look at what is happening now in Iraq, you'll know that what they were saying was just talk, not action. There is no democracy in Iraq. Iraq's citizens feel insecure and invaded. (young Egyptian woman)

²² The focus groups were conducted prior to the January 30, 2005, Iraqi elections, which received wide and more balanced news coverage.

The bad images which made people hate America so much are what Iraq is going through. The last thing I saw on al-Arabia or al-Jazeera was this wounded man who got shot and killed in a mosque! (older Egyptian man)

Some participants recalled U.S. support for Saddam in the 1980s and America's role in his miscalculations before Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Likewise, U.S. policies in the war on terror are seen as feeding violence rather than reducing it. Many focus group members argued that the United States used terrorism as a pretext to attack Muslim nations or that it—unwittingly or wittingly—provoked terrorist acts.

The United States used terrorism as an excuse to attack the Taliban. (older Indonesian man)

I think that there are Islamic extremists all over the world, but the U.S. is turning them on, it provokes them. These extremists react through some devastating acts, and this gives the U.S. reasons to declare war. (young Moroccan man)

A few participants backed U.S. policies against terror, notably older and Indonesian ones. “We should fight the Taliban because they are mean,” said an older Indonesian woman.

America's aggressive stance toward Iraq and terrorism has bred perceptions of American unpredictability among Muslims, along with fears of U.S. imperialism:

[America] looks greedy. It seeks to [take] the wealth and natural resources of other countries such as oil in order to ensure [its] eternal survival. It can do anything to get what it wants. (young Moroccan woman)

They keep saying “let's make peace” but they themselves create war. (young Indonesian woman)

Everybody is afraid of the U.S. We don't know what their next destination is. This year they are in Iraq; next year we don't know whether it will be Syria. We should be careful if we don't want them to put us in their occupation plans. (young Moroccan woman)

“Strategic ambiguity” has costs as well as benefits: it provokes anxiety not just among our enemies, but also among those we want as friends.

Charges of Anti-Muslim Bias

The post–September 11 United States was seen by the focus group participants as hostile to Muslims in general and as confusing moderate Muslims with extremists:

The U.S. does not make a distinction between Muslims and extremists.
(young Moroccan man)

I think the U.S. now is about getting revenge on the Muslim world [for the 9/11 attacks]. I think Bush has a personal interest in getting revenge on the Muslim world. (older Indonesian woman)

Many feel that America blames the world’s problems on Muslims:

Muslims are being made scapegoats. (older Indonesian woman)

[Whenever] anything bad happens, they put the blame on the Arabs.
(young Egyptian man)

U.S. officials’ assertions that America is not fighting against Islam are not believed. “The U.S. is against Islam. It is against us Arabs, Muslims,” says a young Moroccan woman. These views reflect fears that America seeks to dominate Muslims by force and of religious prejudice among Americans. Indeed, U.S. politicians and media are seen as fanning anti-Muslim sentiment.

The focus groups also criticized American visa and immigration policies, real and imagined, for people from Muslim lands, as well as their treatment in the United States:

Today it is said in the newspapers that to enter America you have to be pictured naked to check whether you are carrying explosives or not! Why should I go there to a prison? I’m not a terrorist. (older Egyptian man)

[A] visa to enter Italy is easier [to get] than the U.S. visa. Even if you're illegally in Italy, you can get residency documents. (young Moroccan woman)

I feel disgusted with America. I think about how they will look at me as an Arab when I am walking around in a supermarket or if you get on the bus. You are suspected. (young Moroccan man)

Palestine Intifada Produces Charges of Double Standards

The United States is also accused of double standards regarding Israel and its treatment of the Palestinians, particularly in Egypt. This is a long-standing concern for Muslims, which took on a new urgency with the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000 and the Bush administration's strong support for Ariel Sharon's Israeli government.

[The United States] doesn't deal with Arabs and Israelis in the same way. (older Egyptian woman)

Israel is the main indicator [of how Muslims see America]. (older Egyptian man)

America always uses the veto for the good of Israel; it made us start to hate America. (older Egyptian woman)

Perceptions that the United States does not care about the Palestinians, and that it tolerates behavior by Israel toward the Palestinians that it would not accept from Muslim countries, are among the factors that have darkened America's image in the Muslim world in recent years.

Conspiracy Thinking and Anti-Semitic Stereotypes Feed Anti-Americanism

Unfamiliarity with American politics, combined with hostility to U.S. policy as they saw it, left many focus group participants open to conspiratorial images of U.S. policymaking toward Israel and the Muslim world. The most prominent of these flowed from stereotypes about Jewish influence in America, which were pervasive among the focus group participants in all three countries despite their high levels of

education. Many saw the United States and Israel as synonymous. When they gave their associations with the United States, “Zionism” was often near the top of the list. When they were asked what proportion of Americans are Jewish, wildly inaccurate estimates were common, anywhere from 10 percent up to 85 percent. (The real number is 2 percent.)

Americans are mostly Jews. (older Indonesian man)

The real Americans are the Indians, but those who immigrated to the U.S. are Jewish. (older Moroccan woman)

Even those with more realistic ideas of Jews’ numbers vastly exaggerated their influence:

About 10 percent [of Americans] are [Jews] but in the parliament 80 percent of them are Jews. (young Indonesian man)

Jews control 90 percent of the American media. (older Egyptian man)

(In fact, only 6 percent of members of the House of Representatives and only 10 percent of senators are Jewish. Just one of America’s five leading newspapers is controlled by a Jewish family.)

These anti-Semitic myths promote conspiracy theories involving America and suspicion of U.S. activities in the Muslim world. Several participants mentioned “theories” that the September 11 attacks were masterminded not by al-Qaeda, but by Jews:

They said that bin Laden hit the twin towers, why him? Maybe the Jews did it. (young Egyptian man)

Bin Laden is an Arabic name invented by the U.S. and Jews and used in connection with the killings and terrorist acts in order to worsen the image of Arabs and of Islam. (older Moroccan woman)²³

²³ These canards flow from a broadcast on al-Manar, the Hezbollah television station in Lebanon, on September 17, 2001, which falsely stated that four thousand Jews did not show up for work at the

Since some participants believe Jews run America and hate Muslims, they think this explains why U.S. policy is hostile to Islam and supportive of Israel.

The government [in the United States is] Jewish. All Jews hate Muslims [and] they want to destroy Islam. (young Egyptian woman)

The U.S. arms Israel, because the U.S. is mostly Jews. (older Indonesian man)

Others saw Jews behind American initiatives for democracy and reform in Muslim lands. A young Indonesian man said, “Sometimes behind democratization is Zionism.” Such myths pose obvious problems for efforts to explain U.S. policies in the Muslim world.²⁴

Media and Information Sources: TV Dominates

Television dominates all three countries as the principal source of information about the United States. The main information sources cited by participants in Morocco and Egypt were the two largest Arabic satellite news channels—al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya—and the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) network. In Indonesia, focus group members mentioned the major national networks. These also play a role in Egypt and Morocco, and Moroccans also receive images of the United States rebroadcast from French television. In recent years, the satellite broadcasters’ reportage has included heavy daily doses of coverage highly critical of U.S. policy regarding Iraq, Palestine, and Arabs and Muslims in general. They have often painted U.S. support for reform and democracy in Arab countries as another attempt to control them, helping feed conspiratorial thinking. Competitive pressures and shared outlooks have meant that local television stations and other media have followed suit.

World Trade Center on September 11. This story was widely reported as fact by media in the Muslim world (see Salon.com, October 5, 2001).

²⁴ The pervasiveness of belief in Egypt that a “Zionist lobby” controls U.S. policy toward the Middle East and Israel was confirmed in a 2004 University of Jordan survey, *Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within* (Amman: Center for Strategic Studies, 2005).

In all three countries, print media were an important supplement to television among the educated public. Many focus group members read major national newspapers and magazines (*al-Ahram* and *al-Akhbar* in Egypt; *Tempo* and *Kompas* in Indonesia). They considered radio more a medium for entertainment than for news. Few mentioned listening to shortwave radio stations such as the BBC or Voice of America (VOA).

The Internet thus far has had minimal impact, even among the young. Some of the young participants mentioned getting e-mail warnings about American products and boycotts. The countries in the study are in some of the least wired regions in the world, however, and thus Internet information sources, at this stage, have little reach.

Tell Us More

Participants in the focus groups wanted more information about America in all three countries. They felt their media provide incomplete and partial information on the United States.

The biggest issues are not shown in full. (young Indonesian man)

If you pay attention to al-Jazeera, you'll find some exaggerations. (young Egyptian woman)

News is seen as limited to the U.S. government and contentious foreign policy topics:

We know nothing about the ordinary American or about Americans in general. We judge America based on its foreign policy. (older Moroccan woman)

We only know what is on the surface, and war, not what goes on inside. (older Egyptian woman)

Even though Muslims are influenced by their media's focus on the triad of American officialdom, Iraq, and Palestine, they are also frustrated by it. They want

more information about America, including its diversity of views and its responses to issues besides Iraq and Palestine.

U.S. Government Media in Discredit

Unfortunately, among Moroccan and Egyptian participants, U.S. government-owned media were not serious competitors to the local or satellite television channels. In Egypt and Morocco, some participants listened to Radio Sawa (the youth-oriented music station that has replaced VOA's Arabic service) for its music, but they did not take it seriously as a news source:

They do not give detailed news, just headlines. (young Moroccan woman)

The news broadcasts are very biased to America; they even call the Iraqis "terrorists," not "freedom fighters." (older Egyptian woman)

Everybody knows it is an American station. (older Moroccan man)

Al-Hurra, the U.S. government's new Arabic satellite-television service, was not watched by many participants. Most called it a U.S. mouthpiece:

Al-Hurra shows everything nice about America and blames everything wrong on the Arabs. (older Egyptian man)

[Al-Hurra] is a channel financed by the U.S. Everybody knows the truth. They show some documentaries, but it is not as good as the other channels. (older Moroccan man)

Only a few felt the station had interesting content. "They present some interesting interviews. Very recently, in Ramadan, I saw an interview with Mr. Ojar [the Moroccan minister of human rights]," a young Moroccan man noted.

Hi magazine, published by America for Egypt's youth, was little known or read, even by members of the young focus groups. The few who knew it termed it U.S. propaganda.

Declining Visibility of U.S. Aid

Few Muslims have an idea of the scale or results of U.S. aid to their countries because it has become invisible to them. Older focus group members recalled U.S. food aid and libraries in their youth, but they said no one sees U.S. aid now.

When I was a kid I remember the bags of wheat where you see the shaking hands from the U.S. [the logo of the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID]. (older Moroccan woman)

In the old days, people would feel the aid, but now we don't really feel it. In the early '60s, everyone would get some flour, some milk or something like that and it would have this American logo on it. Now we don't see any of this. (older Egyptian woman)

The university-educated focus group members in Cairo, Casablanca, and Jakarta knew little about U.S. assistance to their countries, or to developing countries in general. As a result, the United States got no credit for its largesse. When awareness of a dozen items on U.S. aid to the developing world and to their own countries was tested,²⁵ most participants were unaware of most of these programs, including major education, health, and democracy projects in Egypt and Indonesia that have grown to hundreds of millions of dollars annually. In other cases—the provision of low-pollution buses or family-planning clinics in Egypt—people assumed the program was their own government's work and were unaware of the U.S. role. Japanese assistance on large-scale construction projects seemed better known than U.S. aid.

No, America didn't give that much money [for elections]. But we did get help from Japan. Japan donated a large amount of money. The voting booths are donated by the Japanese government. (young Indonesian man)

The clinics were Mrs. Mubarak, not the Americans! (older Egyptian woman)

The problem is we don't see where these aid funds go; we see nothing on the ground. (young Moroccan woman)

²⁵ A complete list of programs tested is given in the Appendix of this report.

Total amounts of U.S. aid are also unknown or massively underestimated. Not one person in the focus groups knew that the United States is the world's largest aid donor in dollar terms. Most Egyptians and Indonesians put U.S. support for their countries over ten years in millions; the correct figures were \$7.3 billion and \$1 billion, respectively. Some people think that aid totals are state secrets. An older Indonesian man said, "I think our government is the only one aware of the total amount of U.S. aid." (Ironically, the underestimation of aid totals by citizens of beneficiary countries is the mirror image of the case in America, where surveys show U.S. citizens routinely overestimate assistance to other countries.)

Many focus group members said U.S. aid should be better publicized:

If the U.S. really gives us this money, then how come I never heard of it anywhere? They should publish this information openly. (older Indonesian man)

If they offer funds, they should be advertised so that the public is aware of it. (young Moroccan woman)

Funds addressed for education or any other purposes must be announced publicly in the mass media. (older Indonesian man)

While there was a clear interest in learning more about U.S. aid, in the current climate of ignorance about U.S. assistance and hostility toward America, there was also pervasive suspicion of U.S. motives for aid:

America isn't a friend of ours, so I'm not sure if what it's doing is for our own good or not. (older Egyptian woman)

No matter what America is doing, there is always some motive behind it. (young Indonesian woman)

The situation in the Muslim world is unlike that in the former communist countries, where people saw America as "on their side," due to Washington's long history of supporting the status quo in the Middle East and Asia. Consequently, in Muslim countries people usually do not give America the benefit of the doubt.

Thus, focus group members not only knew little of U.S. assistance; they also wanted to know why it was given.

Impact of Tsunami Relief

Two extra focus groups were held in Jakarta in January 2005 to gauge how views of America had changed in response to U.S. relief efforts after the December 26, 2004, tsunami. The focus groups briefly discussed tsunami aid, but the questions asked otherwise mirrored those of the earlier groups.

One month after the tsunami struck Aceh, U.S. relief had not dramatically changed opinions about America, but the balance of views had become more positive. There was a shift in tone in associations with America. Older women's opinions were mixed before the disaster; after, they were mostly favorable ("can make your dreams come true," "very mature"). Even young men, militantly hostile in December, had mixed reactions to America a month later, including "modernization" and "freedom." But focus group views of President Bush remained quite negative ("likes to interfere," "arrogant," "terrorist").

Most Indonesian focus group members were very grateful for American tsunami relief. Unlike before the disaster, many were willing to give America the benefit of the doubt.

As an Indonesian, I really appreciated their help. Let us think positively, they helped us after they saw the suffering of the people in Aceh. (older Indonesian woman, post-tsunami)

We shouldn't focus on whether or not they had a vested interest. The most important [thing] is that the victims are helped. Assume their intention is good. (young Indonesian man, post-tsunami)

Many were embarrassed by their government's inadequate response to the disaster and felt the U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) responded more efficiently than their own government. Yet some still suspected American motives. "Their mission is aid, but what next? We always have

suspicious,” said a young man. Concerns about assistance coming with “strings attached” also continued to worry some.

Intensive Indonesian media coverage made U.S. disaster relief more visible than U.S. aid had been before the tragedy, but most participants remained unaware that America gave the most in combined public and private aid. Instead, they mentioned Saudi Arabia, Italy, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, and Australia as the largest donors. The initial U.S. reaction, as projected by the media, probably shaped this perception. An older woman said, “At first, [America] gave very little. When Australia donated more money, then America started giving more.” Nonetheless, estimates of U.S. relief pledges (\$350 million to \$1 billion) were much closer to the mark (\$1 billion) than were pre-disaster focus groups’ estimates of U.S. aid.

Indonesians were fairly open to the participation of U.S. troops in the relief effort, recognizing that U.S. logistical support was needed to deliver aid to remote areas:

I feel they are really helping people in Aceh after the disaster. They work hard there together with other NGOs. (older Indonesian woman, post-tsunami)

Our people are not really concerned about their presence. (young Indonesian man, post-tsunami)

Nonetheless, a few were suspicious. “They can [conduct] surveillance [of] strategic locations in Indonesia and in Aceh freely, through their assistance distributing aid,” said a young man. Others hoped the presence of U.S. forces would help dampen the armed conflict in Aceh between the Indonesian military and the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

In general, the tsunami relief effort did not overcome anti-Americanism among Indonesians, but negative attitudes were reduced and more openness to information about America was created. The negatives and positives of American policy and society that were mentioned after the tsunami resembled those mentioned before, but the positives were more numerous. Likewise, when the list of

U.S. aid programs was presented late in the focus group discussions, the members' responses were warmer than those in December:

I salute them. If they commit to what they intend to do without any hidden interest, I would admire them. (young Indonesian man, post-tsunami)

It will help Indonesia to develop as it will help the U.S. to cure their image. (older Indonesian woman, post-tsunami)

Thus, post-tsunami U.S. generosity reduced anger and created opportunities for communication, but it did not eliminate America's image problem in Indonesia.²⁶

America's Perceived Message: We Are the Strongest

Asked what message they think America is sending Muslims, the focus groups said it was about U.S. power. They hear America boasting: a nation that wants "to rule the world" and "be number one." Participants offered examples of America's message:

We are the strongest. (older Moroccan woman)

We are the most powerful and most developed. (young Moroccan man)

You better be careful with me, because if you mess with me I'll bomb your country. (young Indonesian woman)

The war against Iraq and the rhetoric of the war on terror colored these perceptions. Echoes of the "shock and awe" campaign over Baghdad can be heard in the frequent references to U.S. bombing. Several participants recalled the phrase "You are either with us or against us" from President Bush's speech shortly after September 11, 2001.

²⁶ A national poll of Indonesians in February 2005 reached similar conclusions. Some 65 percent said they were more favorably inclined toward the United States due to the American relief after the tsunami. The proportion with a favorable opinion of the United States only rose from 14 percent in 2003 to 34 percent in 2005, however, while a majority (54 percent) remained hostile. *A Major Change of Public Opinion in the Muslim World: Results from a New Poll of Indonesians* (Bethesda, MD: Terror Free Tomorrow, March 2005).

Other messages from America were rare. Only in the Moroccan women's groups were there any comments that America's message involved support for democracy or development. America says it wants "to improve democracy ... education ... women's rights," said older Moroccan women. (The United States has been particularly active in these areas in Morocco.) Yet even sympathetic Muslims spoke of tension between U.S. words supporting democratic reform and U.S. deeds involving power and coercion. "We get mixed messages. We hear the U.S. say one thing and do another, like in Iraq," a young Egyptian woman said. Behind the benign words, in their view, still lies the power of the United States. "There is a good relationship between the U.S. and Morocco—provided we follow them," a young Moroccan woman remarked.

Administration Viewpoint Rejected

In this context, a statement describing U.S.-Muslim relations from a Bush administration perspective received strongly negative reactions in every focus group. The statement said that the United States fights terrorists like the Taliban, bin Laden, and Saddam, but also promotes democracy and development in Muslim countries.²⁷ When the issues were presented in this way, fears of U.S. domination overwhelmed the focus groups in all three countries.

The focus groups were completely closed to U.S. arguments on Iraq and the war on terror. Merely mentioning these arguments aroused intense anger and more charges that America uses its military power to seek control and resources in Muslim lands.

They want to vanquish the Islamic community. (young Egyptian man)

Bullshit. The U.S. is only looking for Iraq's oil. (older Indonesian man)

²⁷ The statement read, "The United States is working for the good of the Islamic world. We fought terrorists like the Taliban and Osama bin Laden because they attacked us and the terrorist regime of Saddam Hussein because no one else would. But we are also working to promote democracy, increase economic growth, reform education and increase the rights of women in Muslim countries."

They don't do things for the sake of Islamic countries. They hate us.
(young Egyptian woman)

America was also accused of hypocrisy, given its previous support for Saddam Hussein, for the Afghan *mujahedeen* fighting with Osama bin Laden, and, initially, for the Taliban. Focus group members also said they regarded U.S. backing for Israel against the al-Aqsa intifada as support for state terror.

Attempts to defend U.S. military action monopolized the participants' attention. After hearing them, the focus groups were deaf to U.S. claims on democracy or development. The Iraq war was thought to negate America's claims to promote democracy, while U.S. support for reform was seen as a sugar-coating for intervention.

No one will do worse than what the U.S. has done in Iraq. They said that Saddam has tortured people but ... the U.S. has done and is doing [the same]. (young Moroccan woman)

Remember when they give you a pill and you couldn't swallow it? So they would give you a lot of chocolate? This is a bitter pill they want you to swallow. (older Moroccan man)

The few participants—generally older ones—who reacted favorably to the second part of the vision, which stressed U.S. aid for reform, were lukewarm; they rejected the first half, which justified U.S. military action. “There were defects in the first part, but I like the second part,” an older Egyptian woman said. Yet even they resented the statement's presentation of U.S. aid as the agent of change. “It is the Americans who will bring [our] rights and set laws?” asked a young Moroccan woman.

The hostile responses to this view in the focus groups indicate the seriousness of the difficulties America faces with public opinion in the Muslim world today. When they hear the Bush administration's viewpoint, Muslims react with hostility and anger. The administration cannot get a hearing, even from educated urbanites sympathetic to the reforms it wishes to promote and whose support is needed to make them a reality.

What Do They Want? Respect and Development Assistance

When focus group members in Morocco, Indonesia, and Egypt were asked what they wanted from the United States, they answered: respect and aid to develop as their countries choose. These themes emerged when participants were given postcards addressed to President Bush and asked what they wanted him to do regarding their countries.

The demand for respect was consistent among the focus groups across all three countries. By “respect,” the focus group members meant allowing their countries to make their own political, economic, and cultural decisions, and above all, it meant no use of force by the United States. They want Americans to listen to them and understand how they feel, not to dictate to them.

Dear President Bush: Please help us with our economy but let us manage our country. (young Indonesian woman)

Dear President Bush: We can accept the help of the U.S. provided that it does not interfere in our [Islamic] principles. (older Moroccan woman)

Dear President Bush: Even if you want to help it can't be done by force! (older Egyptian woman)

Dear President Bush: [America] has to become more empathetic. That could make Muslim people more sympathetic toward it. (young Indonesian man)

The participants emphasized that the United States must avoid trying—or appearing to try—to control their country via development assistance.

If their autonomy is respected, then Muslims want U.S. aid to help develop their economic, educational, health, and legal systems. People in Indonesia, Morocco, and Egypt know America's strengths and want to benefit from them.

Dear President Bush: Our country is in need of your help in order to push us forward. The first thing is to help the young people find a job; to treat the poor sick persons; fight drug traffic and violence. The thing we suffer from [most] is to see that we are being stolen [from] by [corrupt] people among us. Do your best to fight this as well. (young Moroccan woman)

Dear President Bush: You should help us improve economic conditions, education, and health. Help [us] remind the Indonesian government to be fair and to enforce the law. (older Indonesian woman)

Dear President Bush: The characteristics of your American population are education and civilization. We hope you help us develop in all fields instead of killing innocent people. (older Egyptian man)

One concrete suggestion made was to involve immigrants to the United States from Muslim countries in assistance programs aimed at their homelands.

Moroccans were the most open to U.S. programs aimed at promoting women's rights and democracy. Many older Moroccan women mentioned women's emancipation. "Improve women's situation and give more importance to children," one urged the president. Young Moroccans in particular wanted help in achieving democratic reform, including transparency in politics and strengthening the rule of law.

When asked specifically what the United States should do, very few in Cairo, Jakarta, or Casablanca called for U.S. withdrawal from the Muslim world. The angriest—mostly men and Egyptians—wanted to tell President Bush, "Leave us alone," but not many took this position. Despite the rhetorical support for American withdrawal from the Muslim world earlier in the conversations, almost none actually endorsed the idea later when they were asked what actions President Bush should take regarding their countries. The bottom line for most was the combination of American aid with respect for their autonomy. A young Moroccan woman summed up their views: "Dear President Bush: We really need financial aid, but you should not get involved in everything."

CONCLUSION

Attitudes toward America in these three Islamic countries are ambivalent but have swung toward the negative since September 11, 2001. Spontaneous reactions include hostility to American power and policies and respect for American society.

Resentment of American power and dominance is strong, as is personal hostility toward President Bush. Aggressive images dominate associations with the United States. The anger is spreading to American people and firms, though many focus group members still like them. America is also admired, if grudgingly, for its economy, education, rule of law, and management. Muslims are well aware that these strengths correspond to the principal weaknesses that they see in their own societies. The focus groups were divided over American popular culture: American styles and movies are attractive yet also repellent due to what is seen as their vulgarity and anti-Islamic character. Although hostility is somewhat less intense among women, older people, and Moroccans and Indonesians, its intensity across the board is startling.

The patterns of change that led to the current hostility among Muslims toward the United States belie the pat explanations that have been offered for them. Most of the focus group members do not “hate us for who we are”; they felt warmly toward America when they were younger and are now sad that perceptions have worsened. They do not hate America’s liberty or development; they want the same for themselves. Although it is closer to the mark to say they hate America for what it does, it is most accurate to say they are hostile to America’s policies as perceived. They are angry about what they have heard concerning the war with Iraq, the war on terror, and attitudes toward Muslims in the post-September 11 United States. America’s close identification with Israel, along with their own misconceptions about American politics and Jewish influence, has contributed to the anger. This information has been filtered via new satellite-television networks that have focused on the negative and driven local television and press coverage. U.S. government media have little influence in the countries where the focus groups were held, while U.S. assistance programs have become invisible even as their budgets have soared. (Indonesian tsunami relief was the exception here, showing that well-publicized aid can ease anger toward the United States.) Reflecting this, most Muslims say the message they hear from America is force and they reject administration views out of hand. (The only focus group among which this was not uniformly the case was among Moroccan women, who knew of America’s strong support for women’s

rights and democracy in their country.) Yet when the participants were asked what they wanted from America, what they asked for—more respect and responsive aid—were things that America can well offer. Finding ways to do so, and making this a central element in a dialogue with the Muslim world—especially with people like those in the focus groups—is at the heart of the task facing America.

OPPORTUNITIES TO COMMUNICATE

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Despite the pervasiveness of anti-American sentiment today, this research indicates that what America says and how America says it can produce a significant shift in Muslim opinion. Muslims want foreign assistance for their economic, educational, health care, and legal systems. Despite their anger at America, the strengths they recognize in the United States in those areas are precisely what they see as lacking in their own societies. Consequently, they urge America to help in these fields, react quite favorably when they learn what it is doing there, and welcome ideas for further steps. Moreover, new developments in the Middle East and Southeast Asia have created an opportunity for America to raise these issues. With a sufficient commitment of resources and a willingness to speak with more tact and empathy, it should be possible for America to begin a new conversation with Muslim countries and their peoples, drawing on the qualities they note in the United States and its responses to their concerns.

It makes a real difference to Muslims' views of America when they learn of U.S. aid in areas that matter to them. The only participants in this study who said America's message was democracy and women's rights, not force, were the Moroccan women's groups. This was no accident. With vigorous U.S. support, Morocco has witnessed some of the most intense efforts for change in those areas of any Muslim country, including reform of the family code and increased women's political participation. Similarly, the dramatic U.S. tsunami-relief efforts in Indonesia yielded more favorable attitudes and openness to information from America. These reactions suggest that the problem is one of perceptions more than entrenched attitudes and indicate that new information can have corrective power. Indeed, the focus group members' responses, discussed below, indicate that the right arguments, information, and initiatives can have a real impact on how Moroccans, Egyptians, and Indonesians see the United States. The clearly positive

reactions, when they heard about current or possible U.S. aid and a more modest U.S. perspective, were the sorts of responses found in previous research in those countries and elsewhere that showed a potential to change attitudes through sustained communications.

A realistic goal for renewed dialogue with people in Muslim countries would be to swing the balance of perceptions significantly toward America. This does not mean they will accept or endorse all U.S. policies, especially ones on controversial topics. There will always be ambivalence; they will always love us *and* hate us. But the balance between those feelings can be shifted substantially. Many of those angry at the United States liked America in the past, feel disappointed now, and hope to like it again. While the qualitative nature of this research means it produced no numbers, the focus group discussions suggested that new information and a more modest U.S. tone could push many Muslims past the tipping point to a positive view of America, particularly in the more favorable atmosphere now prevailing. Of course, policy differences over Iraq, Palestine, terror, and other issues still exist and will affect Muslim attitudes toward America, particularly in an era of around-the-clock satellite-television news. It is also true that people do not always do what they say; some who claim they would change their minds about America in response to particular information might not. Yet while it is unrealistic to expect a transformation of opinion, there is an opportunity for meaningful change, and we should not lose sight of it.

Such a shift could be crucially important, providing leverage for the United States to help Muslim reformers win against the extremists, terrorists, and boycotters who threaten them and us. Our attempts to promote reform and development will have limited success as long as America is radioactive to many Muslims. (For example, in Morocco, most NGOs not tied to government, under pressure from anti-American groups, boycotted Secretary of State Colin Powell's Forum for the Future held in December 2004.²⁸) Improving our image as Americans would make it easier to aid and associate ourselves with reformers. It would also

²⁸ See *TelQuel* (Casablanca), December 4, 2004; and Craig Charney, "Morocco: The Price of Anti-Americanism," Salon.com, January 7, 2005.

shrink the audience for the anti-American appeals of terrorists like Osama bin Laden and diminish their pool of potential recruits. It would both reduce the commercial and investment risks American firms face and facilitate tourism and exchange programs. The stakes for communications efforts with the Islamic world are thus substantial. While Americans must recognize we are not the motor of change there, we do have vital support and capital to offer; whether or not they are accepted may make or break reform.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the focus-group results, we offer the following recommendations as a starting point for a strategy of American communications toward Muslim countries.

Strategic Perspective: Respectful Partnership, Agreeing to Disagree

The idea of a partnership in which Muslims lead and America plays a supporting role should be the starting point for communications with the Islamic world. Presenting the United States as driving change is rejected, as noted above, but there is room for a more modest approach. Recognizing Muslims as the prime movers of economic and political change, with America backing them up, not deciding for them, is a far more acceptable approach.²⁹ The focus groups stressed that America must listen to Muslims:

The U.S. should learn and apply the priorities set by Muslim countries and should become a partner in implementing those policies. (older Indonesian man)

²⁹ The message read, “In Muslim countries, people are working to promote democracy, increase economic growth, reform education, and increase the rights of women. The United States should listen to them and learn their priorities. The United States should aim to be a respectful partner who helps Muslim peoples to improve their lives and communities, even if the latter do not agree with some aspects of America’s anti-terrorist policies.”

The U.S. will listen to these people and help them, like associations, groups of people working for the country's benefit. (older Moroccan woman)

It's a true opinion as it assures the status of the U.S. as a respectful partner helping the Muslims and not against Islam. (young Egyptian woman)

Experience with reactions in focus groups in other contexts and countries gives us confidence that comments like these are solid evidence of an openness to such ideas.

“Respect” from America—meaning help without control or force, as evidenced in the postcard replies—was essential to gaining a favorable response from the focus group members.

“Respectful” has a lot of meanings. I don't do democracy to get weapons, or with force and power. There are other ways, like media. (older Egyptian woman)

We are happy with American aid but it should not interfere in our affairs. For instance, if [America] will help me in education, it should not orient me about what to teach and what to delete. (older Moroccan man)

If they expect another country to be their partner, then they should adjust to its rules instead of changing it. (young Indonesian man, post-tsunami)

Efforts to communicate are themselves part of respect, since they allow feedback.

The focus groups also showed that for America to be heard by Muslims, we must agree to disagree over contentious security issues. As noted above, when U.S. policies on terror, Iraq, or Palestine were defended or even mentioned, participants focused on them and rejected U.S. comments on support for reform. Explicitly accepting disagreement on these topics was the key to dialogue: it let us *change the subject* from these controversial topics and let them hear what the United States has to say on development.

Regarding their effort to fight terrorism, I disagree with this idea. But I totally agree with their help to promote democracy, increase economic growth, reform education, and increase the rights of women, as long as

they're doing it without asking for something in return. (older Indonesian woman, post-tsunami)

Though we may have different political views, this should not be a problem. What is important for us is that they help us. (older Moroccan woman)

We have to recognize, there are things we agree on, and [things we] disagree on. (older Moroccan man)

Tolerating their differences, agreeing to disagree over contentious issues, and focusing discussion on shared goals—reform, development, and democratization—is the only way to get Muslims to look at U.S. policy. Doing this manifests respect and conveys an acceptance of their right to their opinion.

Agreeing to disagree means prioritizing reform and stronger bilateral ties over public support on security issues elsewhere in the Muslim world. We do not believe it is currently possible both to create a climate more conducive to our efforts to advance reform and to gain the general Muslim public's support on military and security issues concerning Iraq, Palestine, or Afghanistan, for example.³⁰ The fate of our efforts in the latter will in any case be shaped chiefly by events in those lands and not by public opinion in other countries. However, given the pressures for change elsewhere in the Muslim world, if we do not privilege reform there, we risk that those who ultimately gain power will be much less sympathetic to American interests than democratic reformers would be.³¹ Accepting disagreement is not merely a philosophical issue, but one with practical implications as well. For instance, it has been reported that the U.S. government held up publication of the latest Arab Human Development Report—which calls for the democratization of Arab political systems—because its introduction is critical of U.S. policies on Iraq and Palestine. Such an act is the opposite of a respectful partnership.³²

³⁰ This does not mean that the United States cannot or should not maintain military, intelligence, or law-enforcement ties with Muslim governments in support of antiterror and other security-related policies.

³¹ Our thinking on these subjects is influenced by the Council's *Report of an Independent Task Force on Reform in the Arab World* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, forthcoming).

³² Thomas Friedman, "Holding Up Arab Reform," *New York Times*, December 16, 2004.

Another advantage of an approach based on a respectful partnership is that it would allow us to say the same things to Muslims overseas as we do to American citizens. This perspective grew from arguments developed by the Global Interdependence Initiative, an Aspen Institute project, based on extensive focus-group research to help build American public support for responsible U.S. global engagement.³³ Consistency between domestic and external communications would amplify their impact. This is important in a world in which comments about Islamic countries intended for domestic American consumption can harm us in the Muslim world.

Providing Information about U.S. Development Aid

The centerpiece of America's conversation with Muslims should be U.S. development aid. Details, evidence, and witnesses are vital to make credible the claims about these projects. Measures to promote consultation and transparency in aid programs would also be welcomed, the focus groups indicated. America's reasons for aid need explanation. Careful phasing-in of communication is also required.

Although so much U.S. aid is given that focus group members found it almost incredible—as we saw above—most said that if they were convinced the information they were provided were true, they would feel more warmly toward America.

We would be happy, we would be delighted. If these things were true, we would be friends of the United States. (older Moroccan man)

If it's helping us, we'll thank them! (older Egyptian woman)

If it's true, my perception might change. As I said earlier, they must work hard to regain trust. (young Indonesian woman)

³³ See *U.S. in the World, Talking Global Issues with Americans: A Practical Guide* (New York: Rockefeller Brothers Fund/Aspen Institute, 2004).

For some, however, the amount of aid did not make up for U.S. actions regarding Iraq and Palestine.

America's hitting my brother! How can I believe her? You can't hit my brother then give me a present! (older Egyptian woman)

[The] Palestinian cause and Iraq come first before this aid. (young Moroccan woman)

Despite these negative views, positive ones predominated. Our research experience leads us to believe they point to the possibility of changing attitudes. This view is reinforced by the strength of reactions to specific programs in areas that Muslims value, noted below.

The most positive responses concerned U.S. aid to the participants' own countries, particularly regarding education, health, and economic growth:

- *Broader Middle East Initiative Education Programs* (to upgrade teacher training, provide computers and Internet links, and promote literacy): "It would be cultural sharing." (young Egyptian woman) "Spectacular." (young Egyptian woman)
- *Improved Vocational Education in Morocco*: "It is a good thing." (older Moroccan woman) "The U.S. remains the country that offers help to countries; it has a good image in this connection." (young Moroccan woman)
- *Teacher Training and Dropout Reduction Programs in Indonesia*: "If they have no vested interest then it is very good." (older Indonesian man) "Good news for us." (older Indonesian woman)
- *Health, Nutrition, and Family-Planning Programs in Egypt and Indonesia That Reduced Infant and Maternal Mortality*: "These things are good for the country." (older Egyptian woman) "This is great. We need to control the birth rate because Indonesia is still a developing country." (older Indonesian man)
- *Air-Pollution-Control Programs in Egypt*: "This is very important for future generations." (older Egyptian woman) "Helpful." (young Egyptian woman)
- *Free Trade Agreement with Morocco*: "It is something good." (older Moroccan woman) "An important solution." (older Moroccan man)

The most frequent reason cited for doubt about U.S. aid was seeing no results.

Information showing U.S. generosity internationally also got positive reactions.

- *Debt Relief and Promoting Conversion of World Bank Loans to Grants to the Poorest Countries* drew the warmest responses: “This is really great. I will support them in the effort.” (older Indonesian man) “If America pressed the World Bank to write off our debt, then our money will be stronger and [development will be] very possible. That would make us trust America.” (older Indonesian man)
- *The 50 Percent Increase in Development Aid by the United States* also impressed: “Good. The image of the U.S. government is getting better in our eyes.” (older Indonesian man) “It will be good; it will help developing countries.” (young Moroccan man)

Reactions were mixed in two other areas: HIV/AIDS and democracy promotion:

- *The \$15 Billion AIDS Program* was impressive for some as well: “It’s a good program for the world’s health.” (young Indonesian man) Low levels of AIDS awareness in these Islamic countries limited its impact, however. “I don’t see AIDS in Egypt.” (older Egyptian man) “AIDS originated from the U.S.” (older Indonesian man)
- *Democracy Assistance* is very sensitive in Morocco and Egypt: “To train parliamentarians is not a good idea because the Americans will train on what they want and expect from them.” (young Moroccan man) Likewise, U.S. pressure to free Saad Ebrahim in Egypt was not received favorably. Indonesians are more open on these topics, however. “It’s good for the U.S. to be taking sides with a human rights defender. It shows their commitment to human rights.” (older Indonesian woman)³⁵

³⁵ The recent Zogby poll for the Arab American Institute showed that the public in Arab countries places a low priority on democracy assistance. On the other hand, during the recent Indonesian election, an IFES survey showed high levels of acceptance of foreign assistance to elections there.

U.S. actions in controversial security-related matters were dismissed out of hand.

- *Military Support for Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan* was predictably rejected across the board: “To pretend that [America] helps the people of those countries is just a strategy.” (older Moroccan woman)
- *Iraq*: “It is just a façade to make people believe that they work for the benefit of others, [not] to have access to the wealth of other countries such as Iraq and Iran.” (young Moroccan man)
- *U.S. Aid to Palestine and Support for a Palestinian State*: Focus group members (correctly) noted that Israel receives far more general and military aid. They were unaware that U.S. aid to Palestine and Egypt together rivals that given to Israel. U.S. support for Palestinian statehood was seen as old hat.³⁶

There was strong support for national advisory councils of NGOs, government, and business to help identify possible areas for aid. Effective, well publicized accounting and expenditure requirements would also bolster programs’ credibility, given the pervasive concerns about corruption.

The motives for American assistance must also be presented. Many Muslims fear U.S. domination and see aid as a zero-sum game. They reason that the United States would give aid only if it is to its own benefit, and to their detriment.

Why does [the United States] want to help? Why is it doing this? (older Egyptian woman)

It is impossible for the U.S. to give aid without a vested interest. (older Indonesian woman)

These concerns must be confronted or pre-empted with messages about why America is involved. A starting point may be the notion of interdependence: that

³⁶ There were positive responses in the focus groups to suggestions that the United States should push hard for a Palestinian state and pledge compensation funds for Palestinian refugees unable to return to homes in Israel after a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement. The latter was suggested by Walter Russell Mead in “Why They Hate Us, Really,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2004.

America has learned that its security and prosperity increasingly depend on the spread of prosperity and representative government in the Muslim world.

Finally, an awareness effort concerning aid would need careful development. Presenting projects as joint host country–U.S. efforts might help demonstrate partnership and earn credit for both. Given the level of anger at the United States, initial information might focus on the specific national programs rather than U.S. sponsorship. U.S. linkages, results, and motives could be added later, along with U.S. international programs (debt relief, et al.). Aid totals should come last, since these are the hardest to believe unless awareness of programs has already been established.

Public and Private Initiatives

Beyond current assistance programs, the focus groups saw several potential public or private American initiatives as useful to their countries and helpful to the U.S. image. They include programs that could be undertaken by government and private American firms and foundations. The ideas tested only scratched the surface of possible initiatives by public and private actors; a range of possibilities has been suggested.³⁷ Others might come from the large variety of social-responsibility approaches that promoted change and transformed local perceptions of U.S. firms in South Africa under apartheid.³⁸

- *Economic Development—Trade and Investment Missions from the United States:* “We need more multinationals and investment to address unemployment.” (young Moroccan woman)

³⁷ Robert Satloff, “Private Initiatives and Public Diplomacy,” *The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004), pp. 70–87.

³⁸ For examples see Michael Mann, “The Rise of Corporate Social Responsibility in South Africa,” in Duncan Innes, Matthew Kentridge, and Helene Perold, eds., *Power and Profit: Politics, Labor, and Business in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1992); Myra Alperson, *Foundations for a New Democracy: Corporate Social Investment in South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995); and Craig Charney, “Civil Society, Political Violence, and Democratic Transitions: Business and the Peace Process in South Africa, 1990–1994,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41 (1999).

- *Media: Changing al-Hurra from a News Channel into an Arabic C-SPAN* to broadcast parliaments, conferences, and political events in their countries and the United States:³⁹ “We want to see how democracy works abroad.” (older Egyptian woman) “It will be something good, if there are no cuts, it should be direct.” (older Moroccan woman) This might fill a niche not filled by al-Jazeera or al-Arabiya and respond to the desire that focus group members expressed for unfiltered information.
- *Education:*
 - *Assistance with English-Language Education (Books and Teachers):* “The English language is important, especially with the opening of the barriers [to trade].” (young Moroccan man) “It’s good for us because we need English in the globalization era.” (young Indonesian man)
 - *U.S. Help in Updating Science, Math, and Computer-Science Syllabi:* “There [are] textbooks that date years back and that must be changed in order to keep pace with the evolution [of knowledge].” (young Moroccan man) “Very good because those are basic sciences required for further development.” (older Indonesian man)
- *Corporate Social Responsibility:* University scholarships for students and upgrading teachers’ qualifications and syllabi in scientific and technical subjects: “These companies will help the students.” (older Egyptian woman) “How could you deny the genius of Microsoft? I want Bill Gates to come here and teach our kids computer science. But I don’t want politics.” (older Moroccan man)

These initiatives draw their credibility from recognized strengths of the United States in areas where Muslims want help.

³⁹ This idea was proposed by Steven Cook, “Hearts, Minds and Hearings,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2004.

Media and Messengers

An American effort to communicate about development assistance to the Muslim world will require a variety of media and well-chosen spokespeople. To make a difference, a substantial effort is needed. This will mean trying to disseminate hundreds of news stories, buying thousands of television spots and print ads, and spending on the order of \$100 million to \$200 million per year on communications alone, perhaps for five to ten years. The current situation took years to develop and will not be resolved in a day or a year.

- *Engaging News Media:* Communicating means engaging more effectively with local and regional media, making an intensive effort to make U.S. spokespeople and views heard on issues America wants to raise. Although sympathetic media should be cultivated, this also means engaging with critical media like al-Jazeera, not trying to shut it down—which would contradict American claims to stand for free expression and democracy. It also means ensuring that American programs, events, and actions that media cover correspond to the ideas and views we are trying to advance. Engagement should be pursued via every possible media format and not limited to interviews with top officials.⁴⁰
- *Paid Advertising or Programming:* To be heard, the United States has to go where the audiences are. This means large-scale use of paid advertising on popular media, rather than relying on unpopular U.S. government media, such as al-Hurra. (It is the people who are *not* watching al-Hurra that America needs to reach most.) Television is the key medium in all countries in the study, followed by print media. So in addition to news coverage, communication plans should include paid advertising or programs via:
 - National television and press.

⁴⁰ Other formats might include op-eds, press conferences, site visits to programs, other media events, paid spot ads, print/audio/video news releases, short (3–5 minute) audio and video documentaries, half-hour documentaries, and news and current-affairs programming about U.S. assistance efforts. The U.S. government must be acknowledged as the source to avoid accusations of covert propaganda or fake journalism. U.S. broadcasting efforts in Indonesia, which include programs carried on local TV stations as well as shortwave radio and satellite TV, may offer some useful models upon which to expand.

- Satellite television—al-Arabiya, al-Jazeera, MBC, Future TV, etc. (They have already aired U.S.-funded spots for the Palestinian and Iraqi elections.)
- *U.S. Government Media:* American government media can supplement international communications efforts in the Muslim world. Radio Sawa's large youth audience would be good for spots and short documentaries about aid programs. (Although Radio Sawa is seen as lacking informational content, well-produced information about aid could help remedy this perception.) Similarly, U.S. programming in Indonesia on VOA radio and television can carry more information about U.S. aid programming and intents.
- *Make Aid Visible:* There should be visible USAID logos or other forms of identification with the United States on buses, health posts, school equipment, etc., provided by U.S. aid programs. (Where hostility to America is intense, it may be wiser to do this as a second phase of a communications program, as projects are becoming identified with America, and pilot initially on a small scale to test reactions.)
- *Spokespeople:* A variety of spokespeople should be sought, based on their local credibility. These may include
 - Program beneficiaries (ordinary people) and partner groups (NGO and local officials)
 - Local (indigenous) executives of U.S. firms (and their U.S. executives)
 - People who have benefited from U.S. international exchange programs
 - Local alumni of U.S. universities
 - U.S. officials. These might include the ambassador or USAID director, or others with credibility (for example, the use of former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton to promote tsunami relief)
 - Spokespeople who can speak local languages or who are drawn from relevant diasporas in the United States should be sought and used as much as possible.

Challenging Stereotypes Regarding U.S. Policy

There is a need to engage with the stereotypes about America that skew perceptions of U.S. policy in the Islamic world, including those regarding Jewish influence, which the focus groups revealed. This is not a call for a general response to anti-Semitism in those societies, which is beyond the scope of this report. It is a call to better inform people in those societies about how Americans make foreign policy. Since no one now challenges harmful misinformation about Jewish influence in the United States, however, something should be done about that, too. Failure to challenge falsehoods about U.S. policymaking and Jewish influence in America promotes anti-Americanism.

Although this is an important role, it should not be principally a U.S. government function; private entities should also take it on. Candidates include U.S. and European Jewish organizations; prominent U.S. Muslims; interfaith groups that include Muslims, Christians, and Jews; organizations that fund religious tolerance and human rights programs; foundations, universities, academic groups, and think tanks; and journalism-training organizations. Actions might include

- *Academic Dialogues, Video Bridges, and Exchanges*: Fostering contacts between faculty and students of U.S. American studies departments, international relations programs, American politics programs, foreign-policy think tanks, and journalism schools with students, faculty, and journalists in Muslim countries on U.S. politics, media, and foreign-policy making, including the roles of Jews and Israel in them. (American Universities in Muslim countries might play a role here.)
- *Elite Video Bridges and Discussions*: Privately sponsored track-two efforts to establish a dialogue on these issues with influential people on both sides.
- *Fostering Personal Contacts*: Including meetings on the itineraries of international visitors from the Muslim world that will help them form a more realistic appreciation of U.S. foreign-policy making and politics and the power of Jews in them.

- *Video and Audio Documentaries*: Distributing free films and tapes on the U.S. Jewish community, the Holocaust, anti-Semitism (debunking the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” for example) to broadcast media in Muslim countries.
- *Responding to stereotypes*: Private media monitoring bodies like the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) should ensure that stereotypes and falsehoods regarding U.S. policy, including Jewish influence, are translated, reported, and challenged when they occur in the press in Muslim lands. False reporting on Jewish influence in the United States should also be included in the annual State Department reports mandated by the Global Anti-Semitism Awareness Act of 2004.⁴¹

Obviously, before a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement, combating anti-Jewish stereotypes that confuse discussion of U.S. policy will be an uphill battle. But that does not mean it should not be waged, for doing so will make it easier for Muslims to believe information about America and help put America’s opponents on the defensive.

General Considerations

Beyond better content and form, effective communication with the Muslim world will require effective organization. Some of the points below echo findings of prior studies of public diplomacy, such as the Council’s two recent Task Force reports on the topic.

- *Research*: Part of listening to the Muslim world is regular qualitative and quantitative research on public and elite attitudes. A first step would be quantitative follow-up to this research in the countries where it was conducted. Pre-testing of communications and informational efforts before they are launched is also desirable.

⁴¹ The first report under that act covered reports about local Jews in Middle Eastern media, but it did not discuss their reporting on purported Jewish control in America. U.S. Department of State, *Report on Global Anti-Semitism* (Washington, DC: Department of State, January 2005).

- *Coordination:* Global coordination of communications is needed to make them coherent and consistent. This might be done by a body fulfilling the role of the former U.S. Information Agency, whether within the Department of State or at the White House.
- *Country-Specific Planning:* Given the variation in needs and outlooks between Islamic countries, it will be necessary to plan communications in each country as well, focusing on a few issues most relevant to (and accepted by) people there. This could be done by the U.S. embassy and USAID office but should be vetted in Washington for consistency with the overall communications plan. Polls and focus groups should also be undertaken at the national level to help U.S. government representatives foster conversations about topics that interest people in their countries.
- *Piloting:* As the private sector does, it would be wise to pilot communications efforts on a small scale, either in smaller countries (such as Morocco) or individual cities for particular national campaigns. The need to use satellite television, however, means that local or national pilot programs will have less impact than will full-scale ones.
- *Professionalization:* Since communications skills are not normally part of the training of diplomats, consideration should be given to hiring communications professionals to work in Washington and in embassies for the public-diplomacy effort.
- *Sustained Effort:* Changing perceptions of America in the Muslim world will be a multi-year undertaking requiring a substantial commitment of resources. Efforts for communications alone are likely to cost at least \$100 million to \$200 million per year for a period of five to ten years.

CONCLUSION

Despite the widespread anger toward America in Muslim lands, the focus groups offer hope that it is possible to make a new beginning in America's interactions with them. Doing so will mean changing what America says and how it says it, as well as how America deals with and sets policy regarding people in Muslim societies. It will mean listening and consulting more, particularly in planning aid priorities and programs, responding with respect, and recognizing the primacy of Muslim initiative. It also means accepting that we can disagree with Muslim public opinion on controversial issues involving other countries—even terrorism or Iraq. This will require an agreement to disagree on those issues and a bilateral commitment on the key issues of political and economic reform in their own lands. If American assistance is presented in such a context, Muslims will recognize that U.S. programs to support education, health care, economic growth, and legal reform respond to some of their deepest aspirations. American generosity with debt relief and development aid can also make a strong impression. There is scope for further government and private action on science, technology, and English education and on media and investment promotion that, if known, would communicate America's desire to aid development. Pernicious stereotypes about U.S. policymaking should also be combated. But substantial efforts will be needed to inform the public in Muslim countries and to establish a dialogue with them about their needs and American responses and their impact. This will require coordination, planning, careful research and piloting, and a considerable and continuing investment of money and effort.

Yet such an investment could yield substantial returns, not just by improving the image of the United States in the Muslim world, but by helping to speed the process of urgently needed reform and renewal. The results of the focus groups suggest that an approach based on respectful partnership may find a ready response in countries such as Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently noted, "If America wants the rest of the world to be part of the

agenda it has set, it must be part of their agenda, too. It can do so, secure in the knowledge that what people want is not for America to concede, but to engage.”⁴²

⁴² *New York Times*, January 27, 2005.

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

This study presents the results of twelve focus groups conducted among adult, university-educated Muslim citizens of Morocco, Egypt, and Indonesia during December 1–15, 2004, and two extra groups held in Indonesia on January 25–26, 2005. The objective of this research was to learn what educated Muslims in those countries thought about their own countries and the United States, as well as to learn how the United States can better communicate with people in those lands. The focus groups were recruited and moderated in local languages by experienced local researchers with the local affiliates of major international market-research firms, working under the supervision of Charney Research, which prepared the discussion guides and analyzed the results.

The study involved four focus groups in the principal city of each country: Casablanca, done by TNS Morocco; Cairo, by AC Nielsen Egypt; and Jakarta, by AC Nielsen Indonesia. In each country two groups were composed of 20- to 30-year-olds, in order to tap the attitudes of young graduates, and two more were composed of 40- to 60-year-olds (in Egypt, 40- to 50-year-olds) to learn about the attitudes of the generation in the prime of its careers and influence. Two groups were composed of men, one in each age band, and two of women. The young focus groups included employed, unemployed, and student participants, while the older focus groups were all employed professionals. The participants were screened to ensure that they belonged to the “swing group” (neither strongly favorable nor strongly unfavorable toward America) that American communications efforts could reach.

Focus-group work is a technique used internationally in social, political, and market research to understand the attitudes and opinions of particular groups within a population. A focus group is a small group (in this study, eight people) who respond to open-ended questions and statements presented in a “discussion guide.” The focus group is deliberately chosen to be homogeneous in social terms (age, gender, education, etc.) and is led by a trained moderator from a market research firm with a similar background. Observers watch in a back room behind a one-way

mirror so as not to intrude. The discussions are recorded, transcribed, translated, and analyzed. The results are qualitative (driven by words, feelings, and ideas), not quantitative (driven by numbers, as in polling).

Focus groups are particularly useful for teasing out feelings in depth. This is particularly true for those whose members might be reluctant to express their views to survey interviewers: the groups' homogeneity helps to make members feel comfortable, and the group process encourages them to speak. Focus groups can also highlight the similarities and differences between the views of different categories of people (young and old, men and women, etc.).

Unlike a survey, whose claim to reliability is based on the representativeness of its sample, focus group results are useful because they reflect the views of typical individuals in specific social groups. The members are chosen by the market researchers as if they were conducting a survey, to ensure there is no bias in selection within the specified group criteria (age, education, etc.). The number of people who participate in a focus-group project is much smaller than those reached by a poll, but the results are useful because they offer far more detail and nuance on the views of particular groups of interest than a poll might. Focus-group results cannot be proportionately extrapolated to the national population, as survey results can, but they do offer an impression of the attitudes of the populace as a whole and of particular subgroups within it.

POLICIES AND INITIATIVES TESTED

Responses to some American policies and possible initiatives were tested in the focus groups, although not every one was tested in every group. Policies tested included the following:

- America has announced support for the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

- The United States gave the Palestinians \$1.3 billion over the past ten years in aid to build their economy, improve water supply, provide jobs, promote health, and strengthen organizations representing the people.
- The United States helped Muslims defend their freedom in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.
- America just signed a Free Trade Agreement with Morocco, eliminating almost all trade restrictions that prevented Moroccans from selling products to the United States.
- U.S. government pressure helped force the Egyptian government to free the jailed Egyptian human rights campaigner Said Iddin Ebrahim.
- The United States is letting the United Nations run Iraq's first free elections, to elect a government and a constitution-writing assembly.
- The United States is increasing its spending for development assistance worldwide by 50 percent over five years, a bigger increase than any other country.
- To fight AIDS and give AIDS drugs free to developing countries, the U.S. government is giving \$15 billion over five years, more than any other country.
- The U.S. government has taken the lead in forgiving the debts of many developing countries and also proposed forgiving the loans that the very poorest countries have received from the World Bank.

Morocco Only

- To help prepare our students for work, U.S. aid is giving Moroccan schools computers, improved job-training facilities, and training for teachers, principals, and job counselors.
- To improve government services in Morocco, America is funding Moroccan organizations working to train members of parliament, increase government transparency, represent poor people in the cities, and make local government work better.

Egypt Only

- To strengthen Egypt's economy, the United States has given \$2.7 billion since 2000 to help speed reform, increase exports, buy essential imports, and cushion the impact of the Iraq war. Egypt increased processed agricultural exports by 25 percent thanks to U.S. help in export promotion.
- Because of U.S. aid, infant mortality is dropping in Egypt and family planning is increasing. America has provided pre- and post-natal care for a million women, family-planning clinics for two million families, family health clinics, and infectious-disease control programs.
- The U.S. government has aided Egyptian organizations working to build democracy. This has helped to encourage freer elections, aid human rights organizations, train journalists, strengthen civic organizations, improve legal education, and modernize court management.
- U.S. aid is cutting air pollution in Cairo. The 800,000 residents of Shoubra el Kheima breathe easier because U.S. aid helped move out the smelter that was the main source of lead, reducing lead pollution by 75 percent. It has cut pollution from cars by providing equipment and training to make emissions tests mandatory and has given Cairo buses that use low-pollution natural gas.
- The United States is working with the other G8 countries to improve education in the Middle East. Their aid will train 100,000 new teachers by 2008, put computers and Internet connections in schools, translate important scholarly books into Arabic, and support programs to cut illiteracy in half by 2010.
- U.S. development assistance to Egypt in the past ten years has totaled 45 billion Egyptian pounds (\$7.3 billion).

Indonesia Only

- To improve Indonesia's schools, the United States will give \$157 million in the next five years to train tens of thousands of teachers and administrators and cut the dropout rate in secondary schools.

- Because of U.S. aid, infant and maternal mortality have fallen and family planning is increasing. Since 2000, \$120 million was given for pre- and post-natal care, improved child nutrition, and increased contraceptive use.
- The United States has helped Indonesia's transition to democracy. It gave over \$150 million since 1999 to Indonesian groups working to educate voters, monitor elections, train political officeholders, and improve the courts and local government.
- U.S. development aid to Indonesia in the past ten years has totaled over 9 billion rupiah (\$1 billion).
- The United States is the leading international donor of tsunami relief. It has pledged to give 4.7 trillion rupiah (\$518 million) in public and private funds for humanitarian and recovery assistance to the tsunami victims and has sent people and aircraft to deliver aid to those who cannot be reached any other way.

Possible U.S. initiatives tested included the following:

- Creating an Egyptian/Indonesian committee with people from government, nongovernmental organizations, and private business to advise on priorities for U.S. aid.
- Push as hard as possible to create a Palestinian state alongside Israel.
- Promise that when a Palestinian state is created, the United States will give money to Palestinian refugees unable to return to their homes in Israel as compensation and to Palestine and other countries where they live to help absorb them.
- American companies working in our country could offer university scholarships and help improve school education in science and technology.
- America could send more trade and investment missions to our country to buy more of our goods and build more factories here.
- The U.S. government could publicly criticize any violations of human rights by our government and urge it to free all political prisoners.
- The United States could improve English teaching in our country's schools by sending better books and native-English-speaking teachers.

- The United States could help our country bring its school textbooks up to date for math, science, and computers.
- America's al-Hurra satellite-television channel could transmit proceedings of the American Congress and government, or of Arab parliaments and governments.

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