

PolicyWatch #1558 : Special Forum Report

Muslim Engagement: The Obama Administration's Approach

Featuring Farah Pandith

July 27, 2009

On July 17, 2009, Farah Pandith, the State Department's first special representative to Muslim communities, addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss her new role and U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton's approach to Muslim engagement. The following is a rapporteur's summary of her remarks.

The United States currently has an exceptional opportunity to create a new framework for engaging Muslim communities worldwide. As the new administration aims to counter the narratives of the past and break down existing stereotypes, President Barack Obama has set a tone of innovation and engagement based on "mutual interest and mutual respect." This fresh approach inspired Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to establish the Office of the Special Representative to Muslim Communities (OSRMC).

Muslim communities around the world face myriad challenges, including integration, assimilation, navigation of identity, lack of opportunity, illiteracy, women's empowerment, and violent extremist ideology. Although U.S. embassies have engaged Muslims for years, Washington must do more to build partnerships and help find solutions to problems affecting Muslim communities. The current level of energy, commitment, and sophistication has not previously existed, and the United States must seize this opportunity, setting a new paradigm for engagement.

The OSRMC will operate outside of the traditional Washington mindset to work at a grassroots level, engage the next generation, and build new partnerships. The new office will connect directly with Muslims worldwide -- brainstorming with nonstate leaders and individuals inside various communities -- to create sustainable solutions to the challenges they face.

Identity is one of the most serious issues facing Muslim youth today. Many young Muslims, in both Muslim minority and Muslim majority countries, are questioning their place in society and struggling to reconcile their culture and religion with modernity. In response, the U.S. government has created initiatives such as the "citizen dialogue program" to engage and mentor these youths. This program joins young American Muslims who have navigated these complex issues of identity with their peers from other countries. More will be done to seed initiatives that bring different people together to work on ideas and challenges. The OSRMC, for instance, will bring together youth workers from London with those from Amman and Mumbai to discuss how to use technology and sports to most effectively engage young Muslims in their neighborhoods.

Lack of economic development and attendant unemployment challenge Muslim communities the world over. The OSRMC will promote entrepreneurship education, enable access to funding for entrepreneurs of all kinds, and encourage mentorships between business leaders and budding entrepreneurs. Progress can be made within these communities by pairing people with ideas and people with experience.

Another area that poses significant challenges to Muslim communities is the substandard quality of education, which has led to illiteracy and lack of leadership opportunities for Muslim females. The OSRMC aims to build partnerships between leading technology entrepreneurs and the foremost women activists to create

cutting-edge initiatives to increase literacy and promote education and leadership among Muslim women. By developing a local understanding and applying a nuanced approach to engagement, great strides can be made in education standards and practices.

Although President Obama has emphasized that America's relationship with Muslim communities should not be based exclusively on opposition to terrorism, he has also stated that violent extremism must be confronted. In keeping with this philosophy, the OSRMC will help to amplify the voices of those who are pushing back against violent extremism. When given the appropriate tools, Muslims have the credibility and capability to expel extremist messages and ideology from their own neighborhoods.

There is great diversity among the world's approximately 1.3 billion Muslims, and within their communities remains untapped potential for excellence. This latent talent must be found and cultivated through productive partnerships. By bringing together people from diverse sectors, the OSRMC can help bring new or unconventional ideas to life. The OSRMC will host social innovation competitions in which entrepreneurs, technology developers, and authors, among others, will be challenged to create programs that promote inclusion, job creation, and critical thinking. The might and reach of the U.S. government can be leveraged through its embassies into building networks for sharing voices, perspectives, and practices. And the diversity of Muslim communities demands that *all* voices and perspectives be considered in building connections between local communities and leaders. Sustainable and scalable solutions to the challenges facing Muslim communities can be built by this bottom-up approach.

Building partnerships will be a long-term effort, but it must be initiated today. Unprecedented levels of enthusiasm and ideas exist, as well as a new framework within which to work. The generation of leaders engaged today will become some of the United States' strongest and most important allies in the future. By basing the U.S. approach to engagement on partnership building, people-to-people connections, and the new paradigm of "mutual interest and mutual respect," and by acting as a convenor, facilitator, and intellectual partner, the OSRMC hopes to promote great ideas from Muslims around the world -- from Dusseldorf to Dhaka to Delhi.

This rapporteur's summary was written by Jennifer Logan.

Copyright 2009 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy