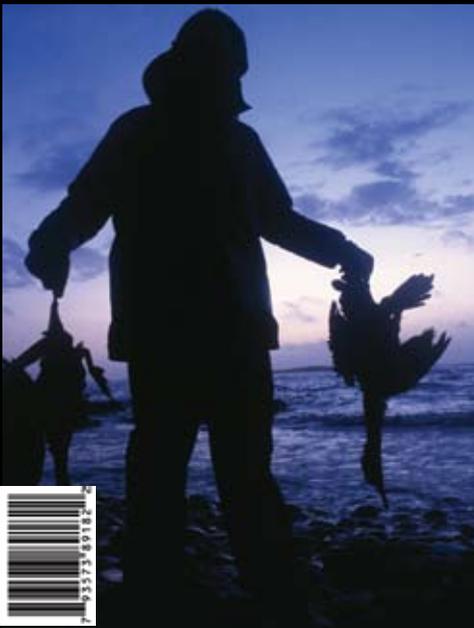


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interview



MADELEINE ALBRIGHT

ON ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MUSLIM WORLD

Interview by AMINA CHAUDARY

President Barack Obama entered office with a clear determination to change the discourse between the United States and the Muslim majority world. Many around the world were inspired by some initial steps, including his Cairo speech in June 2009, which laid out a framework for cooperation less than 100 days into the president's new administration. New organizations, partnerships and efforts were formed around this initiative. However, two years into Obama's presidency, many people question the actual impact of these efforts in the midst of a stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process, an escalation of fighting in Afghanistan and mounting civil rights concerns in America.

I shared a conversation with one of the foremost thinkers, scholars and leaders in this area, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, to reflect on the state of engagement with the Muslim world.

AMINA CHAUDARY: President Barack Obama, since the start of his term in office, has given four major speeches in or about the Muslim world on U.S. partnership and engagement in the Muslim world: Turkey, Cairo, Jakarta and the United Nations. All of them have been strategically placed in institutions that speak of the importance that religion plays in foreign policy. It's clear that the president is attempting to make this a national priority, but increasingly the Muslim world has seen this less in the way of action. Are our words getting in the way of action and leaving us better or worse off?

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT: First of all, I think it's very noteworthy that President Obama has given these speeches. You pointed out that there were four of them, that they were in different parts of major majority-Muslim countries. He has, in fact, broken through some barriers with these speeches alone, and that cannot be underestimated. The things that he has talked about are very essential: mutual respect, mutual interest, mutual responsibility, highlighting our shared commitment to universal values like human rights and democracy, broader engagement with the people as well as with the government. There has been action in terms of what he has done to help the Iraqi people in making sure that they have a secure environment, working with them to overcome challenges in building their own state and facilitating partnerships. He also held, for instance, an entrepreneurial summit to work on deepening ties between business leaders, foundations and entrepreneurs in the United States and Muslim-majority countries. He has made very important strides in terms of his whole approach, and I think that is worth a lot. Another example, which is something I have been involved with, is Partners for a New Beginning (PNB), which is a nonprofit that was established to harness private sector and civil society resources to advance the vision President Obama laid out in his June 2009 Cairo speech of renewed engagement with Muslims around the world based on mutual respect and responsibility.

How do you feel that his speeches are resonating in places where it's important to win over the Muslim youth, such as in Pakistan, where more than 60 percent of the population is under 25 and where we continue to struggle with the message branded by the U.S.?

Well I think that President Obama understands that this is something that cannot be

accomplished with just one speech. That is just the beginning. He has made very clear his respect for Islam, generally, in his understanding. What has to happen – especially in countries that are predominantly Muslim – is an effort to ensure that people are employed, that they understand what their future holds and that they themselves feel that their own governments are responding to them. For instance ... when Secretary (of State Hillary

This is not something that will happen overnight. Partners for a New Beginning is a public-private partnership that is specifically working to help advance economic opportunity through, for example, science and technology or education and exchange programs. The goal is to work at the grass-roots level with local business and community members to increase access to financing and to boost the capability of businesses to provide

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Rodham) Clinton was in Pakistan, she held a town hall meeting to talk with and listen to primarily young people. There is a need to build on these forums for broader communication efforts such as facilitating exchange programs through the educational system or other venues. (The U.S.) is providing not only military assistance to Pakistan but also economic assistance, some of it directed at education. So there is an attempt to show the youth that there is a different future in which force and terrorism is not the answer.

You pointed out something that's very critical regarding the economy and I know that's a very critical issue with regards to PNB. According to the World Bank and the United Nations, approximately two-thirds of the Arab world population is under the age of 24. In the 2009 ASDAA Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey, there were some pretty consistent views regarding opportunities for these young people living in the Middle East. The majority stated their concern over unemployment. Similarly, all the respondents said that having good infrastructure in their country is a top priority, such as access to electricity, water, roads, etc. It's been long argued that one major impetus for terrorism and radical movements is this lack of access to meaningful resources – like you talked about – in education and employment in these regions. What is PNB's role in finding meaningful solutions to this and how does real economic and infrastructure development take place so these young people can be convinced that it actually can and will happen?

jobs and development services, to improve education opportunities and to use technology to build virtual exchange programs and other communications mechanisms. It is an attempt to support sustainability-driven innovation and economic growth, with a focus also on young people, who will be the drivers of a new system. But again, none of this is simple, and it is going to require the cooperation of stakeholders on the ground. That is why it is a public-private partnership – businesses, civil society, educational institutions and community members will all be working together to advance common goals. The hard part here is that people are very impatient. I'm impatient. We see the opportunity for progress and want change immediately. But the fact is that it's very hard to get results overnight. It is a matter of really sticking with it. So Partners for a New Beginning is looking long term at projects that are locally driven and bring sustainable results. For example, we are looking at clean-water projects, and projects to support microenterprise, and venture capital formation and training entrepreneurs. It is about putting into place the systems and mechanisms to find solutions for the kinds of things you are talking about.

A big concern is that this push that Obama's making in the Muslim world, a lot of it is because he is with the party that is in power in America. What happens if he doesn't win in 2012? How can Obama institutionalize his outreach to the Muslim world so that even if he is not reelected, these efforts will continue to develop and bear fruit?

Well, first of all, I am fully convinced he will be reelected in 2012. Generally speaking, there are many opportunities to work with the government in particular countries to create win-win situations, such as making sure that schools are established and that businesses take root. Democracies have a system of government that requires accountability and support of the citizenry. What has to happen, and I think you've seen it, is support in the United States from a variety of interest groups and a variety of legislators who understand the importance of these initiatives. We have to keep pushing on it. When I was secretary of state, I felt very strongly that we needed to do more about understanding Islam and Muslim communities. So we put Muslim holidays on the calendar and I held iftar dinners and I met with a variety of American Muslims who came from a number of different countries. When I later wrote a book about the role of God and religion in foreign policy, I made clear that our diplomats had to understand more about the role of religion. It will take a while, but President Obama is now pursuing a lot of these issues, as is Secretary Clinton. Ultimately, all of this will require support from the people in local communities. We can plant the seeds, but this is not the United States going around telling people exactly how to run their lives, but rather providing models and examples, and helping on infrastructure. It is not about Americans passing legislation saying what X country has to do. That is not what our legislation is for.

One thing I often encounter in my research or in different Muslim countries that I've visited is that a lot of citizens in Muslim countries are wary of American support and claims of wanting to bring in democracy and positive progress. How do you respond to citizens – desperate for democratic change – who say that America historically and currently supports authoritative regimes in the Muslim world?



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ABOVE: US President Barack Obama waves as Muslim clerics (in red and white turbans) and other members of the audience stand following his much anticipated speech to the Muslim world at Egypt’s prestigious Cairo University in downtown Cairo, Egypt, 04 June 2009. The address to the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims seeks to repair relations between America and Islam and deal with a broad range of topics from the Middle East peace process to the war in Iraq.

Well, first of all, let me talk about Islam and democracy. I am a great believer in the fact that there is no contradiction between Islam and democracy. I am chairwoman of the board of the National Democratic Institute of International Affairs. We have held conferences and discussions about Islam and democracy, and are operating in a number of Muslim countries either to work on the nuts and bolts of supporting democracy, or helping women candidates, among other things. I am fully convinced that there is no contradiction between Islam and democracy. But the reality is that the United States, as a government, sometimes has to deal with other governments in order to get policy. It

ASDA'A survey, 99 percent of respondents said democracy was the most important priority for them. Is this just a matter of rhetoric or is it something else?

I think they are different things. As I was just saying, I believe in democracy. What I think happened during the Bush administration is that democracy became equated with the imposition of democracy. This was based in large part on military action in Iraq. Democracy cannot be imposed – that is in itself an oxymoron. It has to come from the bottom up and it has to be supported. It can be supported from the outside, but it has to be something that is indigenous to whatever

until there is long-lasting peace in Israel and Palestine. In other words, without real progress on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, no real, meaningful or lasting diplomacy with America can actually occur. What is the likely outcome and direction in this? Additionally, there are two big conflicts that are taking place in the Muslim world that generate a lot of sentiment and affect U.S. strategic interest: one is Israel and Palestine, the other is Kashmir. How do you see real progress taking place in these two conflicts in the near future? Is it a second-term democratic agenda item, or is it something that will start emerging in the next two years?

“I think people know what the parameters of a solution are. But it’s going to require political will of the parties themselves. While I believe that the issue is terribly important, it is not the only thing that determines how the United States is viewed in Muslim communities around world or the basis on which all relationships should be judged.”

does not mean that we are not fully dedicated to democracy. There has to be a pragmatic aspect to some of our policies, and it requires pushing certain governments. For instance, I think an interesting example is Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a country that has a very good and important relationship with the United States. King Abdullah has moved on a number of reform issues. On the other hand, there are those people who see Saudi Arabia as what it is – a kingdom. So nothing is exactly absolute. As we work with other countries, we also have to stick to the values – democracy, human rights, freedom of speech – that President Obama has been talking about.

The Bush administration made democracy promotion a cornerstone of its policy toward the Muslim world. Even though for President Obama, it’s an obvious agenda item for him, he appears far less vocal in many of his speeches in explicitly mentioning the idea of democracy. Obama’s rhetoric itself suggests that he works with the Muslim world in terms of common interest and mutual respect. But again, referring back to the

country, Muslim or otherwise. Democracy is a process, it is not an event. It is something that is fairly complicated. In the United States, we have complicated elections, and sometimes people do not like the results. Democracy has to deliver. People want to be able to live in a way that can provide for their children, they can have employment. What has happened now is that the Obama administration is looking generally at the conditions which promote democracy – a healthy economy, education, development, growth. There are four D’s that we talk about: development, democracy, diplomacy and defense. As the administration develops its national strategy, this is what they are looking at. When I wrote my book, *Memo to the President Elect*, which I ultimately gave to President Obama, I was very concerned that we had to restore the good name of democracy. Democracy took quite a hit in many ways during the Bush administration because it often came along with the military.

I also encounter this idea that no real partnership can take place with any countries in the Middle East or other Muslim countries

The Obama administration has shown more interest in peace in the Middle East in the last two years than has been shown for a very long time. It is clearly a very important agenda item. The U.S. is very involved: Secretary Clinton has spent a lot of time with (Israeli) Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Obama has sent (U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace) George Mitchell to the region, but ultimately it is the parties themselves that have to make the decisions. We came very close during the Clinton administration. I think people know what the parameters of a solution are. But it’s going to require political will of the parties themselves. While I believe that the issue is terribly important, it is not the only thing that determines how the United States is viewed in Muslim communities around the world or the basis on which all relationships should be judged. The Middle East peace process is certainly one to which a great deal of attention has been paid and will continue to be paid. ... President Obama came into office and was left an unbelievable situation in so many different ways, one of the most difficult being the economic crisis. It’s just coming up on two years since he took office, and he has devoted a great deal of attention to both foreign policy and domestic issues. There is still more than half of the first term to go and I believe that President Obama will be reelected. ... On the issue of Kashmir, this is a very long-standing dispute, and believe it or not, it is a dispute that I grew up with. My father was a Czechoslovak diplomat whose last assignment was to deal with the policy of India and Pakistan about Kashmir in 1948. President Obama did address this issue when he was in Mumbai (in early November). What he had said is that both Pakistan and India have an interest in reducing the tensions between themselves. ... The United States can’t impose a solution,

but again the United States should play some kind of role if it were to result in a way to reduce tensions. The United States is clearly very interested in the region, not just because of Afghanistan, but also because of India and Pakistan. We know it is in the interest of the two countries to resolve this dispute and the hope is that both parties will talk to each other more. This is something that President Obama definitely highlighted as important while he was in India.

In 2000, you came as close as any official U.S. representative has come to apologizing to Iran for the 1953 coup that brought the Shah to power and arguably led to the rise of the clerical regime. If it could be argued that history is extremely important in acknowledging these diplomatic relations for the future, how important are words in negotiating with the Iranians? In other words, is there something to be gained by acknowledging or even apologizing for the past when working on new partnerships for the future?

The way I stated it was recognizing that we had responsibility, which is different than just apologizing. ... It is important to understand history and the effect that it had. In 1998, President (Mohammad) Khatami had been elected (and) there was some hope that, in fact, this could begin a different relationship (with) Iran. Part of the challenge is that there has been a complex history between Iran and the United States. A lot has been written about what has happened with (former Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad) Mosaddegh, and the United States and the United Kingdom had a responsibility for that. At the same time, Iran captured Americans and held Americans hostage during the Carter administration, and since then, the relationship has deteriorated. It is a matter of both countries recognizing their responsibilities for what has made this relationship so difficult. At the moment, however, the problems are not focused on our history. What they have to do with is that Iran is out of compliance with its responsibilities as a signatory of the (Nuclear) Non-Proliferation Treaty, and they are not allowing inspections and it is unclear what their intentions are.

As a final question, a Pew study in 2010 showed a great deal of interconnectedness between Western European Muslims – now approximately 17 million and steadily rising – and the Muslim world. Not only are Islamic groups remaining influential with this population, but these citizens continue

to reside in tense social and political spaces when dealing with the place of religion in European societies. This Pew report also recognizes that not all Muslims in Europe care to develop political ideologies and social agendas and may not support these groups. Nonetheless, this year alone demonstrates the complexities with Faisal Shahzad as well as the plot to blow up the Metro in Washington, D.C. To what extent are we failing to see the greater interconnectedness between Western and Muslim worlds – and without knowing – falling into that division of the West and Muslim worlds?

I have spent a lot of time on this. I am working with former foreign ministers and we are particularly interested in Islam and the West in a variety of ways. We recently held a conference on this topic and at the end, we put out a statement signed by 19 former foreign ministers. ... Among the conference participants was the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, Dr. Mustafa Cerić. He believes that Europeans have to recognize the fact that a great deal of their history and culture has been influenced by Islam. There has to be that recognition. At the same time, he has argued for a new social contract of some kind where the powers that be in Europe would recognize this Islamic influence, and the Muslims who are living within Western countries recognize the legal and governmental systems within which they are operating. It needs to become much clearer that while there is a respect for multiculturalism, there also is a respect for the existence of the nation-state. We had very interesting discussions about this and I think that it is an evolving story. What we felt was that it is difficult to live in that space that you are talking about and that there had to be adjustments made in order to create a more accepting climate.

So how do we integrate American Muslims into this process of engaging with positive diplomacy? I think there is a great energy among us and we want to take part in this process.

That is a very important question and I don't know the answer to that question. ... Ultimately, this is an intra-Muslim issue. I don't think non-Muslims can tell Muslims how to behave with each other. What I have found interesting is the Muslim tradition of *ijtihad*, which is internal review of what the Holy Book says. ... I have worked on this a lot and I find it a very difficult subject in how one categorizes groups of people. For example, people talk about "moderate Muslims." I do

not like that term because moderate Muslims believe passionately in moderation. Much of the existing vocabulary does not exactly work. One of the things we talked about in the statement that we put out is the fact that we do not even know the right vocabulary. The bottom line is that ultimately, if I as a Christian was telling you as a Muslim how to interact with other Muslims, it would be interfering in your internal affairs, so to speak. I have great admiration for Imam Feisal (Abdul Rauf). He is a friend of mine. I think he is trying really hard to make that connection between Muslim Americans and Muslims in other parts of the world, and I think he is a great vehicle for this, or you are a great vehicle for this. But I cannot be the one to tell you how to do it.

What is one thing most people would be surprised to know about you?

I think what most people are surprised about me is that I have a sense of humor. People think I'm terribly, terribly serious and whenever I actually go out and speak, I think people are very surprised that I can be quite funny. §

Madeleine K. Albright served as the 64th secretary of state of the United States. She is the Chair of Albright Stonebridge Group, a global strategy firm, and of Albright Capital Management LLC, an investment advisory firm focused on emerging markets. She also serves as Chair of Partners for a New Beginning, an effort committed to building public-private partnerships in Muslim communities around the world to advance economic opportunity, science and technology innovation, education and exchange to help further President Barack Obama's Cairo vision.

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