

**Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum: May 13, 2003**  
***Bridging the Gap Between America and the Muslim World: The Role of Muslim  
and Arab America Organizations***

**Notes from the comments of Radwan Masmoudi, Nihad Awad & Azizah al-Hibri**

**Radwan Masmoudi** began by stating that the issue of bridging the gap between America and the Muslim World is a very important matter of concern. Dr. Masmoudi described two reasons for the anger felt against the U.S. by many in the Muslim World:

1. Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The U.S. is seen as biased against Palestinians and taking the side of Israel. It is in everyone's interest to see that the conflict is resolved and Dr. Masmoudi is happy to see the Bush administration paying some attention to the issue. Achieving a genuine and lasting peace is in the interest of all Israelis, all Palestinians, the region, and the U.S. Nevertheless, he warned of many hurdles ahead.
2. Perception that the U.S. supports dictators and autocratic regimes in the Muslim World. The U.S. is seen as hypocritical because while it touts the values of freedom and democracy, the U.S. is perceived by many to support dictatorships. Dr. Masmoudi argued that there have been signs of change from the Bush administration and that democracy, freedom, and human rights are in everyone's interest.

Dr. Masmoudi emphasized that Islam and democracy are compatible and that this is the key to promoting democracy in the Muslim World. The problem is the way democracy has been presented, as though it is an imported ideology and incompatible with Islam. Therefore, if Arabs and Muslims believe that they have to choose Islam or democracy, they will obviously choose Islam. Yet Dr. Masmoudi argued that democracy is good for both the Muslim World and the U.S. as it can provide a win-win situation. Muslim Americans are at the forefront of this struggle for democracy.

Dr. Masmoudi described a sense of hopelessness in the Muslim World and a great deal of anger felt by the population. He argued that the challenge is how to provide hope to the people and give them a stake and voice in their future and the future of their country. Terrorism and extremism feed on hopelessness, oppression, dictatorship, and a lack of dignity and freedom. Dr. Masmoudi argued that democracy can provide a solution by addressing political and economic problems in the Muslim World. For example, while there are numerous natural and human resources in the Muslim World, the lack of prosperity is due to corruption. Democracy provides the necessary transparency that is vital to fighting corruption. Dr. Masmoudi was careful to emphasize the general nature of his statements, pointing out that certain Muslim countries are clearly faring better than others.

The Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), of which Dr. Masmoudi is President, is working in a number of countries to address the issue of bridging the gap and to

encourage democracy in the Muslim World. CSID has held workshops in Morocco, Egypt, and Yemen, and is planning activities and workshops in Algeria, Jordan, Turkey, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia, and works to explain the definition of democracy in order to counter misconceptions. Dr. Masmoudi argued that while democracy is not perfect, it is the best system to provide for an elected government, separation of powers, respect for religion and expression, and minority rights. Dr. Masmoudi stated that there is no disagreement that basic democratic principles are compatible with Islam.

Dr. Masmoudi explained that Muslim Americans have an important role to play because they live in the U.S. and have experienced what democracy is. They have the freedom to develop ideas and they can push the issue of democracy to ensure that it is on the agenda in the Muslim World. He concluded by examining five ways that democracy can be promoted:

1. Stop supporting dictators. This will send a message that the U.S. will not ally with dictatorships until progress is made toward democracy.
2. Insist on political reforms in addition to economic reforms in the Muslim World.
3. Allow moderate Islamic parties to participate in the political process. Turkey and Algeria provide two extreme examples where Turkey allowed Muslim parties to participate in government and Turkey is now a leader among democratizing countries.
4. Encourage a moderate interpretation of Islam.
5. Iraq must become a model for a modern democracy.

**Nihad Awad** began his presentation on the topic of bridging the gap between America and the Muslim World by stating that his comments would be from the perspective of American Muslims. Mr. Awad's organization, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), works to empower the growing Muslim American community in the U.S. by addressing civil rights issues and injustices, countering stereotypes, and working to prevent discrimination. CAIR is not only reactive to these issues, but also does preventive work by educating Muslims about their rights and educating organizations that work and interact with Muslims. For example, CAIR developed a guide on Islamic faith and practices and negotiates between workers and employers on these issues when the need arises. Mr. Awad argued that the chief obstacle to bridging the gap is ignorance rather than malice. CAIR works to negotiate a presence for Muslim Americans in society and if it fails to reach an amenable situation, CAIR applies public pressure.

When CAIR succeeds in its efforts, Mr. Awad explains that it sends a message of hope and helps Muslim Americans who have felt marginalized, as well as the entire Muslim community, to become more involved in American society and politics. CAIR's measures provide an alternative to extremism and advocate a win-win model of conflict resolution. CAIR has approximately half a million subscribers, 40,000 of which are media outlets and 2% are located overseas.

Mr. Awad emphasized that the Muslim American community can help to dismantle misperceptions about Islam. For example, he described how after September 11<sup>th</sup>, CAIR clarified fifty official statements condemning the attacks. Mr. Awad argued that the U.S. media did not provide the Muslim community access to the media or a public place to publish this

message of condemnation and solidarity with all Americans. CAIR provided this space and sent a clear message from the Muslim American community, stating, “we are American Muslims” and loyal to the U.S. Another example of CAIR’s work to bridge the gap after September 11<sup>th</sup> was to encourage mosques to hold open houses for non-Muslim Americans. This has resulted in the visit of thousands of Americans to mosques around the U.S.

Mr. Awad explained that CAIR recognizes many American’s fear about Islam and their desire to learn more. To close this gap and address misunderstandings, CAIR designed a package of writings about Islam and distributed it to thousands of public libraries. CAIR is very active in both international and national media, and has developed credibility in the U.S. and overseas. CAIR attends public events, and while its representatives speak the language of Muslim societies, they speak as Americans.

America is a diverse society and Mr. Awad stated that this diversity is not always recognized by the Muslim World. Rather, he explained that the Muslim World often sees America as a nation of white Christians. They do not recognize the freedoms that exist in the U.S. for Muslim Americans – for example, the freedom to criticize American society and government and not be jailed as a result. This is an important example of how Arab and Muslim Americans can play the role of U.S. ambassadors in the Muslim World.

One area where CAIR is often asked to explain U.S. foreign policy is regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. CAIR encourages change through democratic means by encouraging Muslim Americans to vote and write letters to the U.S. government. CAIR has succeeded in engaging the Muslim American community in the American political process but he warned that this engagement is now threatened. The closure of a number of Muslim charitable organizations, FBI raids, INS registration, and the use of racial profiling have all sent a negative message to Muslim Americans, leaving the impression that they are being targeted simply because they are Muslim. CAIR works to clarify government statements that, while often unintentionally, send a negative message to Muslim Americans and foster misperceptions. In conclusion, Mr. Awad criticized the nomination of Daniel Pipes to the board of the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), describing it as a “slap on the face” to Arab and Muslim Americans, and advocated that the nomination be rescinded.

**Azizah al-Hibri** began by describing her organization, KARAMAH – a leading organization dealing with democracy and women’s rights. Working through KARAMAH, Dr. al-Hibri has traveled overseas since 1993 to present ideas of democracy and women’s rights in order to empower women and bring about change in various parts of the Muslim World.

Dr. al-Hibri explained that while the Muslim World has been receptive to her message about women’s rights, recently, the situation in the Muslim World has become very different and much less open to these ideas. Dr. al-Hibri monitors what is going on overseas and since the war in Iraq, she has noted disturbing discussions. People in the area are telling each other “not to look at what the U.S. says, but rather what it does.” The perception exists that America’s actions do not fit its words. In Iraq, the U.S. is viewed by some as bringing back colonialism and missionary activity. Many in the Muslim World see the U.S. using force and supporting

autocratic regimes, and therefore many writers overseas are saying that the U.S. “pulls the wool over Muslim countries’ eyes”. People feel threatened and some have concluded that the only answer to this perceived U.S. deception is to go back to the roots of Islam and Islamic thought, and that further, the “use of force deserves the use of force”.

As a result of this situation, KARAMAH is re-examining its goals and mission. At the moment, it does not believe that it can go overseas with a message of democracy and human rights. Recently, democracy has become a tainted word and many Muslims perceive the call to democracy as a ruse. Instead, KARAMAH is looking inward to the U.S. Dr. al-Hibri explained that patriarchy is rampant in the Muslim American community and that issues of women’s rights are going unvoiced in the U.S. KARAMAH has concluded that the situation is urgent and must be dealt with. In particular, KARAMAH has decided to address the issue of domestic violence among Muslim American women, and is starting a domestic violence branch within the organization.

Dr. al-Hibri argued that instability and war are never good for the promotion of women’s rights, because they cause women to lose whatever advances they have made. They also reinforce stereotypes, for example that Muslim women are passive. If such stereotypes are not countered, Dr. al-Hibri warned that we will be unable to address fundamental issues such as democracy and human rights. She also stated that American Muslim women have been sidelined politically, and it is necessary to lay the foundations for change by influencing public opinion in the community and encouraging Muslim American women to vote. It may take time, but American Muslim women need to get involved in the American political process.

Dr. al-Hibri emphasized that it is a misunderstanding that Islam and democracy are incompatible, an issue she addressed a decade earlier. She described overarching principles of Islam based on restorative justice, compassion, and harmony. “If the two are compatible, how do we address this misunderstanding”, she asked. Dr. al-Hibri argued that we need a different approach for change on the ground in situations where the U.S. is involved. She outlined several possible steps in that direction, such as fostering change from within the faith traditions of the countries involved, thus exhibiting true respect for these faith traditions, looking beyond facile labels in trying to understand Muslims, and laying the foundations for a long term friendship between the US and the Muslim World.

Dr. al-Hibri argued that if people have a healthy alternative to extremism and to the oppressive conditions they are living under, they will choose that alternative. KARAMAH is attempting to develop an alternative way of thinking on various issues. For example, KARAMAH is educating American Muslims in the U.S. about their rights by holding town hall meetings where people can talk about their experiences and even dialogue with US government officials. KARAMAH is also launching a new website to serve as an educational tool, and is beginning a project designed to help Muslim women develop their leadership potential.