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### Obama's first 100 days

by Arsalan Iftikhar

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Washington, DC - During his January 2009 presidential inaugural address, US President Barack Obama sent a clear message to the world's 1.3 billion Muslims when he said: "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

A few weeks ago in Ankara, fulfilling his promise to give a major foreign policy speech from a capital in a Muslim-majority country in the first 100 days of his presidency, Obama emphasised to members of the Turkish Parliament that, "the United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam."

Thus far, Obama has done a remarkable job in his outreach to the greater Muslim world, where perceptions of the United States had suffered immensely from the garbled rhetoric and actions of the George W. Bush administration.

Many American leaders are also following suit in the quest to help bridge the public diplomacy gap with the greater Muslim world. For example, a bipartisan leadership group of 34 American political and civic leaders – including former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Republican Congressman Vin Weber – recently published a report, *Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World*, which suggests concrete ways to improve US-Muslim relations in the future. Moroccan Ambassador Aziz Mekouar called the report "a most constructive blueprint for building relationships of cooperation between the United States and the Muslim world."

The report suggests that the United States partner with governments, multilateral institutions and philanthropic organisations to make education a more powerful engine for employment and entrepreneurship in the greater Muslim world. Thus, by investing in education reforms, both American and Muslim governments can "gain credibility and help transform a high-risk youth generation into a broad and deep pool of skilled workers", which can help advance their respective nations and economies.

During a recent dinner reception in April which was aimed at briefing Washington-based ambassadors and journalists on the *Changing Course* report recommendations, Albright addressed the audience of about 80 ambassadors, journalists and political leaders (some notable faces included Ambassador Mekouar, who hosted the event, former Bush National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley, Syrian Ambassador to the United States Imad Moustapha and Dr. Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention) on the state of US-Muslim relations within the Obama administration.

"When I became Secretary of State, we did not have Muslims employed in the State Department", former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said in her opening remarks that evening. "I went back to my notes when I was writing my book...and I had various notes which read, 'Learn more about Islam'."

In light of Obama's first 100 days in the oval office, Albright graded Obama an "A+" thus far in terms of his overall engagement with the Muslim world. She cited the president's use of diplomacy, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel-Palestine, as a positive step in building a better connection with the Muslim world.

She concluded her remarks that evening by emphasising that this engagement "cannot be done without the people in this room.... We have our work cut out for us."

We do indeed, Madame Secretary.

Job creation and economic development are two key development areas where Obama can expand his reach in the coming years. As noted above, investing in these areas can actually help reduce the threat of extremism by providing youth with opportunities for employment. Supporting effective governments and civic participation, as the report states, will be critical in US engagement with the Muslim world as well.

As Obama continues as president, it becomes a political imperative for his administration to ensure that his wonderful words to the Muslim world turn into tangible and concrete policy changes on the ground. As we Americans consider the completion of the first 100 days of his presidency, let us all work together so that his words of change turn into a collective "audacity of hope" for every corner of the world for the next 100 days, months, years and beyond.

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\* Arsalan Iftikhar is an international human rights lawyer, founder of [www.TheMuslimGuy.com](http://www.TheMuslimGuy.com) and a contributing editor to *Islamica Magazine*. The report, *Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World*, can be found at [www.usmuslimengagement.org](http://www.usmuslimengagement.org). This article was written for the Common Ground News Service (CGNews).

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