

# **TENTH ANNUAL U.S.-ISLAMIC WORLD FORUM**

## **OPENING REMARKS OF MARTIN INDYK**

**Vice President and Director of the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings**

Distinguished delegates, on behalf of Brookings welcome to this tenth Annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum.

When I think back ten years ago to our first meeting after the horrendous terrorist attacks of 9/11, I like to think that we have come a very long way. Conceived in the wake of those terrorist attacks, we believed that it was essential to find a way through dialogue and engagement to try to close the chasm that opened up between the United States and the Muslim world. We were very fortunate to find an understanding and willing partner in the Government of Qatar and in particular with His Highness the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, and its Foreign Minister and now Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad Bin Jasim Al Thani.

In those days after 9/11, Americans were prompted by the question, “Why do they hate us?” It was a simplistic question, but it captured this sense of bewilderment, but also, in essence, ignorance about the nature of the Islamic World and the intense antagonisms that were roiling it. It was in those early years after 9/11 that Americans first began to focus on the Islamic world. People may remember, those of you who were with us in those early days, the polls that we revealed here – of both American public opinion toward the Muslim world and Muslim views of the United States. These public opinion polls underscored how deep the chasm was and the complete lack of understanding of each other.

Then came the war in Iraq, which intensified the antagonisms and widened the chasm. In those days, it was very difficult to maintain the dialogue. In fact, this forum was one of the few places where Americans and Muslims from all over the world were able to engage.

In those days, I remember very well, what had originally started as an idea quickly grew into a reality. We understood the need to engage not just with the Arab world but with the larger Muslim world as well. We learned that Islam in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South Asia had something to teach us, especially in the ways it had developed politically. There were many forums where we benefited greatly from input from all over the Muslim world.

As the dialogue developed, we came to understand the need for promoting cultural exchanges. We brought together in a unique way leaders from the cultural communities of the United States and the Islamic World. Whether artists, filmmakers, musicians, writers, even comedians, we discovered the importance of using popular culture as a way to bridge the gap,

not just among the elites that tend to come to this forum, but among the people and societies where the antagonisms were particularly intense in those years.

We focused on the role of minority communities, Muslim minority communities, in particular the Muslim American community in the United States as a bridge to understanding.

We focused on the issue of education and the importance of educational opportunities in the Muslim world. In fact, we are proud to have helped spawn a number of new organizations – the poster child perhaps is Education for Employment, which grew out of this forum and which is active in the Middle East and North Africa today. It provides youth with world class education and technical training that leads directly to career-building jobs.

And then there was the role of faith leaders in ameliorating conflict. The inter-faith dialogue that we have spawned here at the U.S.-Islamic World Forum has managed to maintain and grow in importance and relevance through the years. Again we are proud to host this year such important faith leaders as Cardinal McCarrick, Iman Nurayn Ashafa of Nigeria, and Rabbi David Saperstein.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which this forum has been able to make substantive contributions toward that challenge we set for ourselves ten years ago in bridging the divide between the United States and the Muslim world.

In the meantime, the context for our dialogue has changed, and changed rather dramatically. The war in Iraq that exacerbated the tensions we've faced has come to an end and 150,000 American troops have come home. Now the war in Afghanistan is drawing to a close, and by 2014, only a residual team of Western troops will remain in that country, with the Afghan army taking responsibility for security there.

And just a few weeks ago, on May 24, 2013, President Obama in effect declared that the decade-long war that the United States waged against global terror has come to a close. As he said in that landmark speech, "This war, the war on terror, like all wars must end. That's what history advises, that's what our history demands."

It was an honest and even agonizing speech, and I'm not sure how many of you paid attention to it, so that's why I'd like to spend a few minutes bringing the highlights of that speech to your attention because of what it says about American thinking toward the Islamic World and because of the ways in which it frames the discussions that we will be having over the next two days

President Obama declared honestly and forthrightly that he believes that the United States compromised its basic values in the war on terror, by using torture to interrogate our enemies and using detention that ran counter to the rule of law. He declared that he would renew his efforts to close Guantanamo Bay. He noted that the United States has spent over a trillion dollars and sacrificed almost 7,000 souls in this war. Of course, tens of thousands of Muslims also lost their lives in this war, many of them targets of attacks by fellow Muslims.

President Obama also argued that the threat is much less than it originally was, still lethal but much less so than in the past. "Al Qaeda and its affiliates still operate." he said. Threats to our diplomatic facilities and businesses still exist. And, of course, there is still home-grown extremism that manifested itself just recently at the Boston Marathon. But this is the future of terrorism and it is very different from 9/11. "The types of threats that we face today are much like the threats we faced before 9/11" Therefore, the President declared that the war of terrorism needs to be replaced by a counterterrorism strategy that is focused, targeted, and designed to dismantle specific networks of extremists who would target America.

In other words, what President Obama has now made clear is that U.S. policy has changed in a fundamental way: no longer will the United States go to war and invade other countries to slay the terrorist dragon. Instead we will partner with other governments that are fighting extremists within their own societies. It will be a supportive role, not a leadership role. We see that today for example in Mali.

Some parts of this approach trouble me frankly, and trouble many of my colleagues in Washington. Some of them are in the audience today. Some of us would like to see a more robust engagement by the United States in Syria, for example. But we have to face facts. The American people after a decade of war are tired and seek to disengage -- not from the world, but from that part of the world, the greater Middle East, that has proven yet again so immutable to American force and American efforts to promote peace.

And here is the irony. When the United States sullied forth with its great armies to end the tyrannical rules of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, we were reviled and rejected in much of the Islamic World. And now when we are no longer prepared to play that role, no longer willing to intervene militarily in places like Syria, we are reviled and criticized. It is like nothing the United States is ever right or good enough.

The challenge for Americans today is to find a "golden mean" between isolation and intervention. President Obama tried to lay out this path in his speech on May 24. He called it "engagement". Engagement is something we have always tried to do in the US-Islamic World Forum.

The President spoke of political engagement where we patiently try to support transformation toward democracy in places like Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia. Engaging with Islamist governments, as Sheikh Ahmad pointed out in his opening remarks, is one of the great challenges today, in particular by supporting women's and minority rights in these newly democratic countries.

The President also spoke of economic engagement, the need for the United States to help modernize economies, improve education and encourage entrepreneurship.

And he spoke of diplomatic engagement, to help resolve conflicts, to help create Israeli-Palestinian peace, and to help shape an emerging global order that is more peaceful and just.

These are roles that the United State can and should play, and it can do so effectively by working with likeminded people throughout the Muslim world.

Finally, President Obama spoke of the ideological conflict that fuels terrorism. There is the belief by some extremists that Islam is in direct conflict with the West. That violence against the West, including civilian targets, is justified by the pursuit of some higher cause. He said that this ideology is based on a lie, that the United States is not at war with Islam, that this ideology is rejected by the vast majority of Muslims, and that Muslims themselves are most frequently the targets of terrorist attacks.

How to confront that common ideological threat of extremism that is a danger to Americans and Muslims the world over is a challenge that we at the US-Islamic World Forum must continue to confront. We have the ability to do so thanks to the Government of Qatar and its hospitality. We have the ability to engage in a dialogue, in an effort to understand each other, in an effort to listen to each other in a way that will leave us better equipped to build bridges of understanding and thereby defeat the extremists on the most potent battlefield -- the battlefield of ideas

That is our challenge today as it was ten years ago. That is the challenge we hope to take up with you over the next couple of days and a challenge I look forward to us working on together.

Thank you for attending this year's U.S.-Islamic World Forum. I wish you all very good deliberations.