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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

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Third public hearing of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

Statement of Rachel Bronson to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States July 9, 2003

Challenges within the Muslim World

Chairman Kean, Vice Chairman Hamilton, Board of Commissioners, thank you for the invitation to speak before the 9-11 Commission about the challenges confronting the United States in the Muslim world. As you may know, I co-directed *Guiding Principles for U.S. Post-Conflict Policy in Iraq*, a December 2002 report co-sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy. Ambassadors Edward P. Djerejian and Frank G. Wisner co-chaired the report. In addition, during "Operation Iraqi Freedom," and the weeks prior to it, I traveled twice to the Persian Gulf to discuss the war, its aftermath, and American

Current News

The Commission has released its final report. [\[more\]](#)

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Commission Members

Thomas H. Kean
Chair

Lee H. Hamilton
Vice Chair

foreign policy with those in the region. Although the Council on Foreign Relations makes my research possible, it bears no responsibility for these remarks

While much public attention has focused on the question of whether we are now embarked upon a "clash of civilizations," I would like to offer an alternative lens to view the current crisis. Today, America is involved in a political and economic struggle, rather than a cultural one. This, in many ways, is good news. It is much easier to respond to political and economic challenges than to overcome cultural differences. But it is not a palliative. Many of our political and economic policies are the result of decades of hard work, careful consideration, and evolving political realities. They have been constructed for good reason and have strong domestic support. Acknowledging that our policies have caused, and are causing, friction does not offer immediate, ready-made policy options.

I bring to you today no easy solutions. In the Middle East, political and economic problems are becoming entwined with faith and national identity. It makes it feel as if we are engaged in a clash of civilizations. But if we allow this superficial understanding to take root within American policy toward the Arab and Muslim world, we will create a self-fulfilling prophesy. We will abandon the dwindling number of American supporters in the region; those who cling to the ideals America espouses and silently root for our victory over the radical Islamic groups that are systematically destroying centuries of culture and progress. We will hand a victory to our enemies who would like nothing more than to see the wrath of America turned against Arab/Islamic civilization. We will become complacent, believing that policy options simply do not exist. We must avoid this at all costs.

The Problem We Face

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After September 11th, Americans fully confronted the rage and humiliation experienced by many in the Arab and Islamic world. But anti-Americanism had been on the rise before the terrorist attacks. In a prescient article written in summer 2000 entitled "The World's Resentment" Peter Rodman, now Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, suggested that rising resentment was inevitable, healthy and something we could do little about.

What was not expected was how quickly genuine support for America would sink. A recent PEW survey found that in Indonesia those viewing the US favorably fell from 61% to 15% over the course of the past year. In Turkey, 71% of the population is worried that their country will be the target of an American attack. Anti-Americanism has become the flavor of the day in the political circles of America's closest friends such as South Korea and Germany, as well as in the capitals of other traditional partners like Saudi Arabia. A majority of respondents in five of seven NATO countries support a more independent relationship with the United States. According to the same poll "the bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world." Far are we from the day in 1962 when Prince (later King) Faisal of Saudi Arabia told President Kennedy, "after Allah, we trust the United States."

Radical Islamic groups are setting the parameters of local debate, even as they offer fewer and fewer political solutions. Their ardent anti-Americanism receives a receptive audience throughout the Arab and Islamic world. After September 11th, finding ways to reverse this appeal and re-attract America's supporters is an urgent foreign policy priority.

Choices We Have Made

Today's fight against al-Qa'eda and other Islamic radical groups flows directly from policy choices American decision makers and their Middle Eastern counterparts made in order to win the Cold War. In Afghanistan in the 1980s, American leaders were convinced that bringing down the Soviet Union was worth the costs of empowering religious radicals. In the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, "What was more important in the world view of history? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet Empire? A few stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?" Had our leaders known that the cost of bringing down the Soviets would be over 3,000 dead Americans, the destruction of New York's World Trade Center, an attack on the Pentagon, simultaneous embassy bombings in Africa, the destruction of the USS Cole and radical cells sprinkled across the globe operating against the United States, it is almost certain that they still would have deemed the costs acceptable.

During the Cold War the United States also chose a strategy of working alongside states for geo-political reasons, rather than ideological compatibility. Determined not to recreate the British imperial experience, the United States steadfastly refused to pressure allies too hard on domestic reforms. As early as the 1950s, Britain's Foreign Secretary and Foreign Minister were beseeching the United States to use its influence to press the ruling Saudi family on their domestic and foreign policy. The United States steadfastly refused. Eventually, Islamic radicals such as Egypt's Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's right hand man, used such refusal against the United States in order to draw recruits to their cause. Zawahiri's argument that "the U.S. claims to stand for human rights and democracy [but] forces corrupt regimes on the Muslim world" resonates with citizens throughout the region.

The lack of imperial design also allowed the United States to quickly abandon countries like

Afghanistan and Pakistan when the Cold War ended. As neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan were pressing geo-political concerns in the new world order, the US withdrew most of its presence from both countries. It left behind divided fractured countries awash with weapons and in the grips of state collapse. The environment provided fertile ground for organizing an anti-western crusade.

More recently, policies designed to restrain Saddam Hussein deeply damaged American standing in the Middle East in general, and in the Gulf in particular. In the early 1990s the Clinton Administration engaged in a policy of "Dual Containment" against Iran and Iraq. Washington was forced to rely heavily on Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Gulf States. The willingness to allow Saddam Hussein to stay "in his box" while millions of Iraqis suffered severe deprivation, had a profoundly negative effect on America's regional standing. Statements that 'the containment of Iraq was worth the lives of half a million Iraqi children' ricocheted throughout the Arab world and provided grist for America's critics. Worse, the inability to bolster American military presence with social or economic policies that addressed pressing local problems led many in the region to ask "where, if anywhere, is American policy taking us." Anti-Americanism did not begin after September 11th. It had been steadily growing in the Gulf for a decade.

Choices Our Partners Have Made

Our Middle Eastern partners have made their own set of choices that have allowed radical Islamic groups to flourish. During the 1970s and 1980s leaderships across the region chose to fund local Islamic opponents who were also at odds with the regimes' more secular political opposition. For example, during the first Intifada, Israel supported radical Islamic groups as a counter to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which the Israelis

considered far more dangerous. Egypt's President Anwar Sadat did the same in Egypt in order to counter his secular rivals. The policy was mimicked in Tunisia.

Radical Islamic movements were further strengthened by the economic windfall Arab Gulf states accrued from high oil prices in the 1970s, the Iranian revolution (and Saudi response to it) and the return of the "Afghan Arabs" in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Gulf Arabs poured significant resources into schools and mosques across the globe but then failed to restrain what was being taught. Saudi Arabia sent significant funds to Pakistan, Afghanistan and eventually Central Asia, Africa, and beyond. In addition, in Afghanistan during the 1980s, the Saudis matched American covert funding in Afghanistan "dollar for dollar" in the fight against the "godless" communists.

Many Middle Eastern states used this growing Islamic opposition, which they had originally encouraged, as an excuse for enacting emergency decrees and erasing civil liberties, further motivating religious opposition. The result has been increasingly authoritarian states that are challenged by the most venal religious opposition. The United States has also become a target as it is the key backer of such regimes. Since the press in most of the Arab world is dissuaded from directly criticizing their local regimes, America is also often to be used as a synonym for the regime itself.

Things We Can Do

American and Middle Eastern policies have contributed to the very real challenges we face today in the Muslim world. New policies are required to reverse mounting anger and rage. While we cannot and should not expect to attract the good will of the entire population, especially of the violent fringe, we must try to win back some of the good will that existed toward the United States in the days

immediately after September 11th and during the early 1990s. This is a battle for the political center. And at the moment, we are losing. Several policy areas require urgent attention.

(1) Engaging the Israelis and Palestinians

Active American involvement in the peace process will help reduce the appeal of Islamic radicals. Such groups feed off the seemingly endless violence. The conflict fuels protests, demonstrations and anti-U.S. sentiment throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Moderates throughout the region regularly advise that tamping down the violence would significantly help their cause.

The President deserves credit for realizing the importance of engaging his Administration directly in the peace process. His promise of a free trade agreement for the region was creative and helpful. The Administration however does not seem to have contingency plans for when radical groups attempt to thwart progress. Secretary of State Colin Powell's response of "I hope not," to Charlie Gibson's question "one very significant incident, and doesn't the entire roadmap come apart?" did not provide much assurance. Such contingencies will be needed, as violent challenges to the process are predictable.

The contours of a final settlement were drawn for us at Camp David and Taba. While we cannot drag the parties back to where they were, we can serve as a catalyst for change. And that is a role we should whole-heartedly embrace.

(2) Committing to Nation building

The world watched overwhelming American power defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan in a matter of weeks, a victory that eluded the Soviet Army for a decade. But the world also

watched how quickly American interest and commitment flagged in the post-conflict reconstruction. America's inability to offer a convincing path to a better Afghan future led many in the Arab and Muslim world to question whether the United States could do anything better in Iraq. Perceived apathy was one reason for the lack of support we received in the run up to "Operation Iraqi Freedom." It also fed the myth that America cares very little about what happens to Muslims around the world.

The current problems the United States is confronting in Iraq, further compounds the notion that America does not take seriously the problems of Arabs and Muslims. It is not lost on the rest of the world that when the United States is serious about something, it is able to follow through. Consider the case of Germany after WWII, a project we were deeply committed to seeing through to the end. While in many ways Germany is significantly different than Afghanistan or Iraq, it was also an easy case: a country with a history of democracy and a culture and language familiar to many Americans. Nonetheless, the United States kept more than 200,000 troops within the American sector of Germany. U.S. military commanders ordered approximately 30,000 war weary soldiers to retrain for policing duties in what became a U.S. constabulary force. These constabulary troops were responsible for law and order and border patrol and given new training in order to police the peace. They were equipped with horses and motorcycles to tackle their new responsibilities. No such commitment has been made to Iraq, nor to Afghanistan.

In addition to contributing security forces, America made a significant economic contribution to the reconstruction of Germany. Between 1948 and 1952 Washington committed 8 billion dollars in Marshall Aid, most of it coming in the two years between 1948 and 1950. This is a far cry from the 1.7 billion dollars that US officials have stated is the only

money American taxpayers will be asked to contribute to Iraq's reconstruction.

Our failure to fully commit to nation-building directly empowers our detractors in the region. It bolsters the arguments of those who say the United States cares little for Arabs and Muslims and is content to allow them to live in chaos and deprivation. It provides for the anarchy in which radical groups can thrive. In Iraq, the post-conflict plan called for a reduction of troops from 150,000 to 30,000 within a few months of the end of combat operations. After reality set in, the Administration appropriately readjusted its position and extended the stay of troops serving in Iraq. Had the United States gone in and stated strongly that 150,000 would stay indefinitely, it would have been a very different message than the current one, which suggests that we planned badly, and resistance has been tougher than expected. It also would have allowed America an earlier withdrawal. History shows that a serious and early commitment to law and order is necessary to build a functioning economy, a free and fair political system and a healthy civil society. The reluctance to commit to a serious law and order campaign from the very beginning and to flood Iraq with resources has only emboldened opposition and is enticing troublemakers from around the region to drift towards the fighting in Iraq.

(3) Focusing on our friends as much as our enemies

America will not be successful by force alone. While military action is sometimes required, as it was in the case of Iraq, the United States will draw supporters if it is engaged in a broad effort to help its friends, not only destroy its enemies. The social and economic challenges facing the Middle East are tremendous. Across the region, almost half the population is below the age of 15, economic growth is sluggish and unemployment is increasing. These are the concerns that are consuming local leaderships,

as well as their populations. One very senior Saudi official told me in the summer of 2000 that unemployment was the country's number one national security threat. Serious American attention must be given to devising policies that help address these mounting concerns.

The Administration has taken an important first step by requesting \$145 million for the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), an initiative devoted to expanding grass roots economic, political and educational opportunities in the Arab world. But as of yet, there is considerable confusion among local populations as to how to access it, or how to draw America's attention to worthy local projects. The embassies do not yet appear to be reaching out to the local communities and planning seems to be happening mostly in Washington. MEPI is an important first step. Increased attention must be given to improving the communication between the embassies and local figures.

The United States must also think seriously about promoting sounder education as an integral piece of its foreign policy. The Administration has correctly raised the issue of Saudi funding for radical Islamic schools and mosques. Such pressure must continue. But cracking down on this kind of funding is only part of the solution. Many parents send their children to such schools because they offer hot meals and lodging, not because of the religious content. America should be in the business of championing schools that offer skills and opportunities to local citizens. It requires a long term strategy to wean away recruits from al-Qa'eda's grip.

(4) Improving communication channels between Washington and the World

In the wake of September 11th, considerable attention was given to the fact that the United States was not mounting a successful public diplomacy campaign and was losing the battle of

hearts and minds to its radical opponents. Unfortunately, attention to public diplomacy has seemed to dissipate. America's efforts to build international constituencies must be rejuvenated, not only to better explain current U. S. policy, but also to transmit back to Washington concerns of the local populations.

In the lead up to the war in Iraq, for instance, there was considerable concern in the Middle East that the United States did not have a serious "day after" plan. US policy makers appeared unconcerned with the potential of Iraqi civilian casualties and the effect on neighboring populations if Saddam released chemical or biological weapons. These very real fears were shrugged off, rather than seriously considered. Had they been engaged, the US might have received additional support.

Even where concerns were exaggerated or misplaced, precious little was done to provide facts to the contrary. The fear that there would be untold numbers of civilian casualties came from the belief that tens of thousands of Afghan civilians had died in the American attack. This number was put forward by the Taliban and barely refuted by the United States. What the world saw was a notable callousness toward Muslim citizens. The United States did little to show how those numbers were inflated. In fact, even now, it is exceedingly difficult to get estimations of casualties from any branch of the US government.

Another fear was that if Saddam Hussein used WMD against Americans in Iraq, the deadly content would spread throughout the region. Again, little was done to show the scientific unlikelihood of such a scenario. American disregard for Arab life seemed reinforced. A better communication strategy, one that explains America's rationale to foreign publics, but also incorporates their concerns, would significantly help our friends defend their support for us.

Into the Future

The challenge radical Islamic groups pose to the United States will not simply go away. To be convinced, one needs only to look at the landscape of current and future political hot-spots. Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, Indonesia, Palestine and Sudan all require American attention. In each case, the United States is likely to side against organized Islamic opposition. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States is already confronted with the thorny question of how to separate constructive from destructive Islamic opposition. Given political realities, it will be exceedingly difficult for the United States to claim it is not engaged in an anti-Muslim crusade.

Failing to make the case will antagonize a significant portion of the world's population. PEW's poll results cited above suggested that the antagonism is already beginning. Avoiding an anti-Islamic crusade (i.e., a clash of civilizations), must become a principle American foreign policy goal. Ignoring it will not make the problem go away. It will only ensure that it becomes a pressing problem on every foreign policy decision maker's agenda.

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States
The Commission closed on August 21, 2004. This site is archived.