

Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Panel 2 Question and Answer

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(left to right): Tamara Sonn, Mamoun Fandy, and Amy Hawthorne

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you very much. We appreciate all of your comments. We'll now open it up for--we have about 20 minutes for questions from the Commissioners. Bishop Murphy?

COMMISSIONER MURPHY: Thank you, all three of you. It's been very, very helpful. I'd like to ask a general question, and perhaps you might want to respond to this, each one of you in your own way, and perhaps among yourselves. Reacting to Dr. Lawrence's remarks, a thought struck me that, in light of what you said, Professor Sonn, that perhaps we find ourselves, or do we find ourselves in a potential Catch-22 here, that the more we westerners seek out moderate Muslims for dialogue, the more we end up having the extremists convinced that the colonization is continuing, albeit in a more subtle way, and the more we might end up striking negative blows to some nascent moderate voices within these countries. I perhaps am not posing it well, but it would please me very much if the three of you might want to reflect a little bit on that kind of a scenario and see whether or not this is a realistic way to go.

DR. SONN: Well, I think that's a very cogent observation. It is true that when we identify certain groups as our chosen Muslims in a Muslim country, they can appear as if they are collaborators with the enemy. I think Dr. Fandy's comments were very pertinent in this regard, corroborating actually what I was saying about our stance with regard to nation building. The marginalization of large sectors of society, especially the majority of society, in the post-colonial condition, third-world condition of huge gaps between the majority poor and the minority wealthy, huge gaps in education levels, that marginalization tends to result in a victim mentality. Those huge majorities of under-educated people, then see the people who have better educations, as collaborators with the foreigners who have kept the majority poor. It is true that better education leads to a broader world view and a broader world view is generally what we tend to recognize as a moderate world view, that what we tend to recognize as extremist world view is one that recognizes only a very narrow world view, a world view of us against them. So I think that your observation is accurate, that if we target particular groups, especially if they are a minority with the group--I don't mean religious minority, necessarily, but social or economic minority--the elites, who have the best educations, who speak the languages we understand, who speak French or English, then they can be looked upon as collaborators with the West.

DR. FANDY: Well, I agree totally with Dr. Sonn's observation, but this is a very important question. And let me take one example that I'm extremely familiar with, and that's the case of Egypt and American engagement with Egypt. I think, just to see the American engagement with Egypt, mostly we realize how much we don't know about Egypt, or we engage the wrong people and start the wrong debate. If Egyptians, for instance, left to their own devices on the issue of Muslim-Christian relations, for instance, I think they would do a better job than we are preaching to them what to do. Following the conferences that started in Egypt throughout the '80s until today, I think the debate on intercommunal relations is much more sophisticated than the debate I hear here. And I, as somebody who grew up in Egypt, grew up under poor conditions in Egypt, not from an elite family or something of that sort, and yet as an America as well, it pains me to watch that terrible disconnect in terms of priorities of important issues. I think we have to be broadly interested in any promoting tolerant, Islam for instance. We cannot lump al Zhard with the Islamic group and say these are bigoted forces. This is absolutely the wrong approach. I mean to look at al Zhard--al Zhard as a university, is a force of moderation throughout the Muslim world that's promoting Islamic moderation. It might not be to our liking, but that's the best we can get. So we'd better engage the people that are interested in issues of tolerance against engaging with the forces of tolerance against the forces of extremism. Now, on the issue of the Copts in particular, I think if we make the Copts--that we are the patrons of the Copts, rather than the Copts are Egyptian citizens, Egyptian nationals, they have to fight for their rights internally. They're probably recreating that idea that these people are--the people who are under our protection, and we send the wrong message. So we have to be absolutely careful in terms of who to engage and what's the level of engagement; is it broad or is it targeted and specific? Just watching the media campaign, for instance, in terms of our campaign on terrorism, how we're engaging the Arab media, for instance, we're doing the wrong thing, we're engaging the wrong media. Instead of focusing on mainstream channels to talk to the Arabs and Muslims, we're focusing on channels where a PR company told us that this is the greatest channel in the Arab world. So just the terrible lack of understanding of mechanisms and the nature of debate complicates the issue, and I think we need to learn a little more about these places before we preach to them.

MS. HAWTHORNE: Well, I would agree. I think, like many things, the success of such efforts very much depends on how they're conducted. And given I think what the other two panelists spoke of is correct, given the often understanding that the U.S. Government has of the complexities and nuances of local conditions and particular countries, compounded by the fact that U.S. Government, per se, can be a very clumsy force. It can be counterproductive, for example, for a U.S. embassy in a particular country to very visibly openly engage with particular leaders or groups or even give them financial support. That's usually something that backfires on those individuals. But to the extent that regimes', governments' actions and policies have an influence in those countries on the general atmosphere for discussion and dialog among people in those countries, and to the extent that the United States can try to exercise positive impact on those regime policies, that's, I think, the most appropriate role for the United States to play. I think, of course in some cases in particular countries, there may be certain religious leaders who may want to receive some sort of moral support from the United States. I'm not precluding those types of situations, but generally speaking, what I'm trying to paint a picture of is we may have a sort of hands-off approach at the micro level, but at the higher level, a much more vigorous interest in the internal political conditions in these countries.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you. Ambassador Tahir-Kheli, you have a follow-up question?

COMMISSIONER TAHIR-KHELI: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to ask Professor

Fandy, as a follow-on to what you were saying, because I think one of the issues that has come up, and it's actually quite a remarkable issues, that in the aftermath of September 11th, there really has been a--sort of multiple ways of looking at this whole issue of Islam and the impacts that it has had on extremism, et cetera. Rather than just a blanket condemnation by the United States, I think people have, from the President on down, as well as the media, generally trying to understand the underpinnings of what causes it. This is the first such comprehensive look, in my memory of having been in the United States for 40 some years, that this is actually happening. You raise some very interesting issues about what not to do and looking at the wrong set of people, which is very important as we try and understand how to do it right. How would you actually go about trying to find the right interlocutors and identifying them, given that this is a new area where their expertise is limited, or at least it's not being as extensively used? But there is a genuine, I think, sort of look at it now, and so the how-to becomes, I think, as important, as any other issue, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that? DR. FANDY: I think there are two ways, one that's internal and one that's external. I think the last I looked America has 7 million Muslims living who are American Muslims. And we need probably to identify the elements among the Muslim community that can carry the message of their country to their co-religionists abroad. And in that sense the selection criteria ought to be very, very important. I think it is a natural impulse to probably select somebody who has a Muslim organization in Washington to be speaking on behalf of Muslims. I think that would be the wrong approach. There are faces of Islam that are much more interesting, who play by the American rules and play by the rules of their own religion. For instance, instead of just selecting an activist from Washington to talk to Muslims, it would be good to have a good role model. The Nobel laureate in chemistry in California, Ahmed Zewail, who's an Egyptian and a Muslim and an American, this is a person that would say, yes, the American dream works, it works for Muslims, and it can carry the message forward. You can have somebody who has just no standing, neither abroad nor here, to talk about Muslims. Then you have a disconnect. So it's very important to select internally. That's one. Externally we have to identify first of all the needs, what kind of mainstream channels, newspapers, people that we talk to and give interviews to, as for, I think, knowing the Muslim community, media community in particular, in the Muslim world they've been complaining. The moderate forces have been complaining that we're trying to talk to U.S. officials. They're not giving us interviews. So the people who are fighting our fight in the Muslim world, we're leaving them in the cold. And as one chief editor of a newspaper told me, does the United States talk to only people who insult them? And that's very strange, that we engage people who are against us, rather than engage broad-based people who support us, and that requires a lot of work. There is a good deal of research in the United States universities that tell us about these Muslim communities throughout, and instead we opt for quick one-liners from a journalist. And this is not the moment for really going after quick solutions. For this campaign, the immediate campaign, there are immediate problems. But for the long term, the root causes of terrorism, it requires thorough and very important engagement, and that will take time and we have to be patient. Thank you. CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Commissioner Gaer. COMMISSIONER GAER: Thank you. I wanted to turn back to some of the points that Dr. Sonn raised and then ask all the panel a question. You spoke of colonialism, poverty, hopelessness, humiliation, and a syndrome leading to victimization. Absent from that, it seems to me, is the whole question of their attitude towards the way out or modernization or whether there is too much modernization or too little. And I'm wondering if you and the other panelists wanted to offer us any insights into the degree to which the attitude towards modernity and economic development is a factor in the growth of the extremist and anti-Western sentiments in some of the countries we've been talking about. And secondly, we heard in the prior panel, as well as on this panel, about the importance of the development and growth of civil society groups including human rights groups within each of these countries. Now, I'm wondering, is this being thought of as an alternative to the development of religious organizations? Are religious groups a place for dissent, new ideas, the development of critiques about social life? Are you proposing civil society groups, democracy and human rights groups as the alternative to that? Or is this simply another way of reinforcing the existing complaints and sense of victimization in the society? I would just be grateful for the comments of the panel. DR. SONN: I'll just start. I want to hear what everyone else says too, but again, very, very good questions, especially the question about the solution. Again, because I teach all the time, I have to start with a broad historic background, but I can do it in two sentences. Look at this past century of efforts to deal with colonialism and post-colonialism. Pre-World War I was a phase of western-oriented liberalism with translations of Montesquieu and Rousseau everywhere, formation of political parties and parliaments. That was because Europe said, "Well, when you people are capable of running your own lives in a way that we recognize is legitimate, then we'll give you independence." After World War I, of course, the answer was, "You're not quite ready yet." And so those promises, those western requirements for liberal democracy seemed hypocritical. As a result we get a second phase inter-war period of rejection of western liberalism and attraction toward Soviet style socialism, very modern, very progressive and the Bolsheviks had been able to overthrow these hideous Romanoffs, who were just like our--sort of imperialist leaders. So they thought that would work, and great promises were made by the boys in the universities in the 1940s, who ended up being Nasser, and the leaders of the Baath Party, and in fact Saddam Hussein the next decade. They made great promises for progress, development, independence, autonomy, and they also failed for a variety of reasons. It was after clearer specific events such as the 1967 war and the destruction of the combined air forces within six days, and the 1971 civil war in Pakistan. Pakistan at that time was also led by a socialist, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. That that solution seemed to fail. So western liberalism doesn't work. It's hypocritical because the Europeans won't allow us the freedoms they demand for themselves. Socialists are a misfit. It doesn't work. So the phrase became--and here's where your question is so provocative--"Islam is the solution." And you still see this graffiti everywhere in the Muslim world from throughout the Middle East and even in South Africa, you can still see "Islam is the solution" written. It does seem to them to be a solution. It is a Utopian approach. It is a very defensive approach. It is the kind of approach that I described earlier in my comments. They seek to destroy us and so we go back to our own resources. Islam provides everything that's necessary, social organization, political organization, economic organization, health resources, science, all this, a very

comprehensive holistic view. Again, that was a consciousness-raising phase, Utopian, comprehensive, defensive. But it didn't work either. And so then we see a split within that Islamist movement. That is the Islamist movement. One is the extremists, "Let's intensify our efforts, and let's purge ourselves of any nonstrict Muslim." And the other is a modification of those rules, a moderation of that approach, a more practical self-critical approach. We're seeing that in fact under President Khatami in Iran. We're seeing it in several Islamist groups throughout the Muslim world, not government groups, but Islamist groups. So, yes, the question is a solution, and the issue is a transition from a Utopian inflexible approach to one that actually works, and that's where our policies can be effective again, identifying those groups who are willing to moderate their views, who are willing to be self-critical, who are willing to take responsibility for their own society upon themselves. With regard to the second part of your question, civil society, yes, civil society is a very popular phrase in the Muslim world. 1994, in fact, we had a huge conference in South Africa, Post-apartheid South Africa and Civil Society in the New South Africa, and we had leaders from all over the Muslim world speaking about how important civil society is. Why? Because their governments back home are oppressive. And so civil society is seen by the Islamic communities, Islamic jamaats, organizations, are seen by them as civil society, and hopefully effective against their totalitarian governments at home. They do call for democracy by any other name. Sometimes they use the name. Sometimes they reject the name, but they call for civil rights, individual liberties, group liberties, individual political empowerment, and religious freedom. They call for those things, but they don't find it in their governments at home, so they see their own religious organizations as part of civil society. I want to turn it over to other people now, but religion and civil society working together.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: We have only a minute left of this panel. DR. FANDY: I'm going to say just something very quick. CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you. DR. FANDY: And not to go into abstract, but on a personal example. I come from a village in Southern Egypt to two illiterate parents. And I studied at Assiut University, and most of my colleagues now, who were at Assiut University in 1980, some of them were implicated in Sadat assassination, and some of them are in the caves of Kandahar. I am here testifying in front of you. The difference is, is that I was recruited by Fulbright and most of them were recruited by al Qaeda. That's a very important example. I could have been in Kandahar. I'm a very good candidate for recruitment. But I was saved by a Fulbright Scholarship to the United States. Education, education, education is the solution. Also we have to not lose sight that the poor are not the ones that are carrying this fight. The guy who is carrying the fight in Kandahar is a \$260 million Osama bin Laden, and his second lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, used to live in the exclusive neighborhood of Maadi in Cairo. It is not my neighborhood in Luxor. So blaming the poor is not the way to go. We have to look this thing in the eye and identify culprits and take the debate very seriously in terms of its details instead of politicizing the issues. We have to look at the facts and see what happens. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: We have only 30 seconds. MS. HAWTHORNE: Yes, I'll be very brief. Just to respond to what I understood your question, the second question. The way that I see it, it's not that civil society and religion are, or religious organizations are alternatives to each other. They're actually interwoven within the same sector, if that's even the right word for it. I mean, most civil societies, quote, unquote, organizations in the Arab world, have some religious affiliation or rule. A number of groups that the United States has sought to engage with or support that are very western looking is very tiny. And so both are important.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: One last question. Commissioner Shea? COMMISSIONER SHEA: Yes. I'll make this very, very specific, Dr. Fandy. We also have to remember that Mohammed Atta was also given a western education, so I think we have to probe even further about what the differences are, where the differences lay. But I wanted to ask you, you made a reference to the wrong media and the right media. I presume you were talking about al-Jazeera as the wrong media. I would like to hear your views about what the right media are, what media we should be using to reach the Arab world. And also not a day goes by that I don't remember Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who is not only a great Egyptian voice for democracy and for religious tolerance, but he's also an American citizen, and he's in prison serving a long sentence for precisely those reasons, and the Religious Freedom Report that just came out in the State Department didn't even mention him. They made some broad allusion to intellectuals in prison over the year, but no mention of his name. What can we be doing for him? He seems like just the kind of person we'd want to see active in Egypt?

DR. FANDY: I think it's a very complex case, and you know what kind of complex case it is. But let me take on the media issue very quickly. I had listened to, let's say, the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, talking to al-Jazeera as well as to Egyptian television. Two differences. Egyptian television ran the interview four times on 14 channels and reached 70 or so million people in the Arab world. On al-Jazeera his interview was sandwiched between, you know, a Taliban propaganda before and after, and the questions were absolutely sometimes nasty rather than informative. So some PR company told us that al-Jazeera is the thing to talk to the Arab world, but I remind you that only 10 percent of people in the Arab world have satellite channels. Most of them listen to their local television. In particular now, in the month of Ramadan most of them watch a good local channel and entertainment, and probably they will tune in to al-Jazeera for only like 30 minutes during that segment of news. So we need to engage broadly more mainstream newspapers and other things, "Al-Hayaat," "Al-Shark Al-Awsat" and other things--and "Al-Ahram"--these are mainstream old newspapers that have a constituency. On the issue of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, I know Saad and I consider him a friend, a very good friend. Saad got caught into local politics, and I think the dangerous thing to do is really to personalize some of the human rights issues or to use one simple--it's easy. It's an easy thing to do, but we need to really address the question broadly, and sometimes when we say that because Saad Eddin Ibrahim is an American citizen, then what do we do those who were arrested who are not American citizens? I think the signal we need to send ought to be broader, and I think in my judgment personally, I think President Mubarak, as well as his cabinet, are conducive to an American debate. We have a lot of leverage on them, and we can talk to them. They might not yield for--not wanting to appear as yielding to American pressures, but there are other ways to make that face-saving mechanism available and get what we want without actually making our friends sometimes look like they are lackeys of the United States or they are banana republic regimes rather than serious regimes. We need to give both sides what they want, and in that sense I think if we engage President Mubarak head on, probably he can free Saad Eddin Ibrahim, but we have to,

without really publicizing these issues and making it like a big issue where we undermine the legitimacy of the leader in front of his people. I mean we have to make that balancing act. It's a very, very careful balance that we have to maintain. And also we do not need to actually politicize the issues that we care about. I think the issues we care about deeply we need to engage these people in subtle form, quiet form. The moment it becomes a media campaign, then the ability to actually affect and get results is going to be almost nil. CHAIRMAN YOUNG: I would like to thank our panelists very much. This has been enormously enlightening and helpful. Thank you, and we will now invite our next panel to join us, if they would. Thank you.