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The United States and Islam

Let nations speak peace

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After the chill of the Bush era, ties between America and Islam can only get better—but how much better?

Aurora



IT IS three years since Senator Barack Obama pronounced that America "is no longer a Christian nation—at least, not just." The words sounded harsher than he intended: he meant to make the point in a more positive way, stressing that the United States was as much a Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or non-believing polity as a Christian one. In Turkey in April the president seemed to turn the formula on its head, declaring that "We do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation" but "a nation of citizens" bound by values.

And in a warmly received speech in Cairo on June 4th, which repeatedly cited the Koran, he called for a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world" based on the "truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition."

The philosophy may not be perfectly coherent, but the mood music is clear—absolute opposition to sectarianism, to any emphasis on religious difference rather than commonality. And quite a lot of Muslims seem willing to hear it.

Take the reaction to a recent appointment that caused far more interest outside America than inside it. When Dalia Mogahed, an Egyptian-American social scientist, was invited in April to join a White House advisory panel, the press in her native land gushed with excitement.

This was not just because Ms Mogahed, who analyses the Islamic world for Gallup, a polling organisation, is a devout Muslim. Her appointment (to a 25-strong panel on "faith-based and

neighbourhood partnership”) was also hailed as an endorsement of her argument that Islamic and Western values are more compatible than civilisational warriors think.

The exuberant reaction to Ms Mogahed’s nomination suggests that, for those willing to look, there are easy ways to warm up relations between the United States and the Muslim world (including America’s Muslims); the Obama presidency is busy finding them. Such was the suspicion between most Americans and most Muslims in the Bush era that it did not take much to improve the climate. One thing that helps is big presidential speeches (in Turkey in April and in Cairo this week); another is a sprinkling of domestic job offers, mostly to younger Muslim Americans.

In Turkey Mr Obama’s visit is remembered less for what he said, than for some neat choreography that managed to please devout Muslims without upsetting secularists. His body language went down well—“He’s like us, eastern, warm.”

And as some recent Gallup findings show, the change of guard in the White House led to an immediate upturn in attitudes to America’s leadership among most Arab Muslims (see chart 1), with the exception of Lebanese and Palestinians. Meanwhile the American public perceives the Muslim world as hostile to the United States, but it does not—to anything like the same extent—reciprocate that hostility. Although a steady 80% of Americans believe Muslim countries are unfavourably disposed to their homeland, only 39% of Americans (see chart 2) return the compliment by voicing “unfavourable” attitudes to the Muslim world.

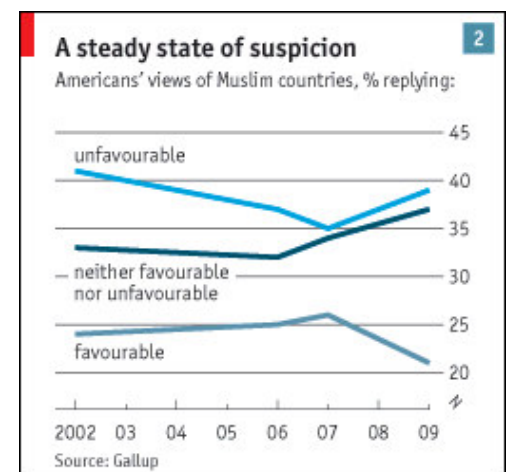
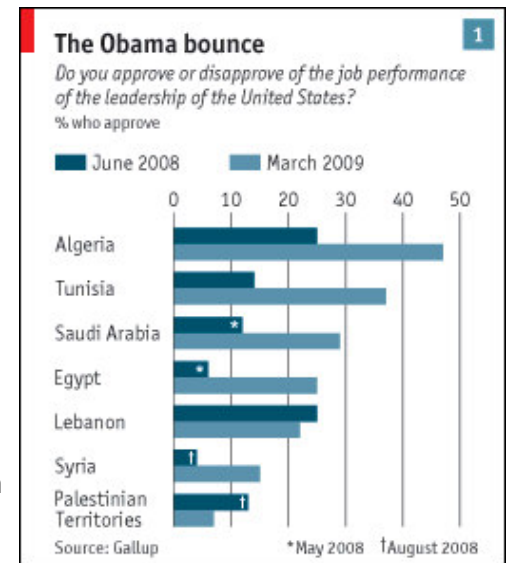
This suggests that a section, at least, of America’s electorate is open to the idea of better links with Islam. In Washington’s establishment, meanwhile, venerable figures like Madeleine Albright (who as secretary of state gave military help to the Balkan Muslims) are rehearsing reasons why America and Islam can be friends.

For groups committed to that principle, the change in climate feels dramatic. Daisy Khan, co-founder of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, predicts that a wave of second-generation Muslim-Americans will now enter politics, unlike their cautious, apolitical parents. In Obama’s America, she thinks, the overseas ties of Muslims can help with civic diplomacy.

Well, perhaps not all overseas ties. Parts of the American Muslim world are still in shock over long sentences handed out in May to five leaders of the Holy Land Foundation, a charity, on charges of helping Hamas. As a result of the trial, America’s law enforcers have scaled down once-friendly ties with some Muslim-American bodies.

In its choice of Muslim personnel, the Obama administration has artfully sought out people with little involvement in the messy world of institutional Muslim politics. But making easy gains, and dodging controversies, including religious ones, has its limits. Hard choices may lie ahead in the area of religious liberty.

Philosophically, America’s Commission on International Religious Freedom (a bipartisan body that advises Congress and the White House) is in step with the Obama mood. Its latest global report stresses that in many places, Muslims are victims of discrimination, not its perpetrators. Suffering Muslims (be they Uighurs in China or Shias in repressive Sunni states like Saudi Arabia) need America’s support—as part of a foreign policy that favours just, tolerant societies. So the commission believes, and so the Obama people, in theory, say too.



But how far will the president go in scolding states identified by the commission? Its report adds five new countries (including Iraq, Nigeria and Pakistan) to the eight already classed as "countries of particular concern" over religious liberty. Among 11 countries placed on the commission's "watch list" are Afghanistan, Indonesia, Tajikistan, Turkey—and Egypt. Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state, will meet the commissioners soon, and they will have some hard questions for her.

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