Faith-based Diplomacy: Bridging the Religious Divide
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Good morning, it is a great pleasure to be with you today to speak about a new form of engagement called faith-based diplomacy. First we must ask what it is. At the macro level, it simply means incorporating religious considerations into the practice of international politics. At the micro level, it equates to making religion part of the solution to identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy. More often than not, these conflicts take the form of ethnic disputes, tribal warfare, or religious hostilities.

Since its inception in 1999, our Center- the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD)— has been practicing faith-based diplomacy in a number of trouble spots around the world, including Sudan, Kashmir, Pakistan, Iran, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. Perhaps the most far-reaching of these interventions has been our work in Pakistan where we have been working for the past seven years to reform the madrasas, including those that gave birth to the Taliban.

Few in the West are mindful of the glorious history of these religious schools; but from the Middle Ages extending through the sixteenth century, they were the unrivaled peaks of learning excellence in the world. Indeed, it was European exposure to them that led to the creation of our university system in the West. In their later reaction to colonialism, however, they purged their curriculums of all disciplines associated with the West—to the point where the majority of them today focus solely on rote memorization of the Qur'an and the study of Islamic principles.

Our goals in this project have been twofold: (1) to expand the curriculums to include the physical and social sciences, with a particular emphasis on human rights (especially women's rights) and religious tolerance, and (2) to transform the pedagogy in order to create critical thinking skills among the students. The latter is important because as things currently stand, these students have no ability to question or challenge the overtures of extremists who recruit them to their cause.

Our efforts to date have been well received and have thus far involved about 2,700 madrasa leaders from more than 1,600 madrasas throughout Pakistan. While this sounds like a large number, it is not since there are at least 20,000 madrasas in existence today (not even the government of Pakistan knows exactly how many).

This progress stands in marked contrast to earlier failed attempts by the government of Pakistan (GOP) to reform these schools. In the wake of 9-11, for example, the United States gave the GOP $100 million for educational reform. The madrasas, which are

independently funded (most of them locally, some from the Gulf), refused to participate for fear of losing their independence or of being forced to secularize their curriculums.

The success that we have experienced is attributable to the fact that we have (1) conducted the project in such a way that the madrasa leaders feel it is their reform effort and not something imposed from the outside (which means they have significant ownership in the change process), (2) appealed to their own heritage—not only of their own institutions, which from the Middle Ages to the 16th Century were without peer in the world as institutions of higher learning, but even going back farther in time to the early period of Islam when Muslims accounted for many of the pioneering breakthroughs in the arts and sciences, including religious tolerance, at a time when Christianity was woefully intolerant. Once they begin to internalize this, they start walking a little taller and begin thinking that perhaps they can do better.

After attending the workshops, a number of madrasa leaders have asked for similar training for the teaching staff of their own madrasas. Equally significant, both male and female madrasa leaders are now requesting that ICRD conduct training programs for the female teachers of girls' madrasas, something that the men had previously strongly opposed. This is important because (1) women, particularly in the rural areas, are often stricter than the men in their adherence to Islamic precepts and (2) as in most cultures, they enjoy a near-monopoly in influencing the formative years of their children (before they reach the madrasas). Thus, women represent a powerful grassroots influence in Pakistani society, and their engagement in this work is every bit as important as that of the men's.

Finally, the attitudinal surveys of workshop participants have shown that a majority of involved madrasa leaders who formerly preached the need to fight the West are now preaching the need for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. The following vignettes provide a feel for how faith-based diplomacy helps to achieve such results.

Engaging the Madrasas

In the summer of 2006, at the height of the conflict in Lebanon between Israel and Hizbullah, I and two of my board members visited a couple of the harder-line Pakistani madrasas that had been linked to terrorism. The first was a Deobandi madrasa near Karachi that had spawned the two most violent anti-Shiite terrorist groups and which was thought to be the chief supplier of fighters for Kashmir and Chechnya. The second was a Wahhabi madrasa outside of Lahore that had been linked in the popular media to the London bombers. In each situation, as we addressed a roomful of madrasa leaders, administrators, and senior faculty, it was clear there was a lot of rage in the air over U.S. foreign policy more generally and over what was then taking place in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah.

In both settings, we were able to get past the rage by calling their attention to the occasions when America had intervened on behalf of Muslims—in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia,

and Kuwait. Lost in most accounts of Somalia is any mention of the more than 100,000 Somali lives that were saved as a result of the humanitarian aspects of that intervention.

We further noted that while the United States could rightly be accused of operating with a double standard in the Middle East owing to its strategic relationship with Israel, so too could a number of Arab leaders be accused of operating with a double standard who complain mightily of Israeli mistreatment and then turn a deaf ear to Palestinian pleas for humanitarian assistance. In short, there are double standards everywhere one turns, driven by perceived national self-interest.

I then said that we weren't there to talk about such issues, but rather to discuss religious values that we shared in common. I then quoted from memory several passages from the Qur'an that collectively call for separate nations and tribes to know one another, cooperate with one another, and compete with one another in good works. I said that I and my two colleagues were there to open the competition in good works and then initiated a give-and-take discussion of religious values that both Islam and Christianity share in common, including their strong reverence for Jesus. By the end of this exchange, the rage had given way to a spirit of total acceptance.

A similar thawing of attitudes took place at one of our workshops for Deobandi madrasa leaders from Baluchistan (the, so-called "hot zone" of Pakistan near the Afghan and Iranian borders). In response to that presentation, one of the madrasa leaders reacted by smiling, putting his hand over his heart and proclaiming, *"You have made me very, very happy. I thought that all Americans hated us."* (While Americans are everyone's favorite target these days, Pakistanis care enormously about what Americans think.) This was followed by a remark from another madrasa leader who commented on a situation in his village in which a young lady was caught talking on her cell phone at 2:00 AM with a young man from another village in whom she had an interest. For this perceived violation of tribal custom, the village elders decided that she should die and the boy should lose his nose and ears.

The madrasa leader noted that although this sort of thing was not unusual, he felt compelled to intervene in this situation on religious grounds because of the workshop discussions on human rights in which he had just participated. With some trepidation, he sought permission from the elders to mediate the matter on the basis of Qur'anic principles. By pointing out that there are no restrictions against women talking to men in the Qur'an and referring to selected passages that encourage the peaceful resolution of differences, he was able to resolve the situation without anyone being harmed. Hopefully, this can serve as a precedent for that village (and perhaps others) when dealing with similar problems in the future.

This was an instance in which religion trumped tribalism in a context where it is often difficult even for Muslims to determine where one ends and the other begins. But it is not

always a given that religion will carry the day. As some tribesmen are quick to point out, their tribal customs date back 3,000 years, whereas Islam only goes back 1,400 years.

Engaging the Extremists

The ICRD training has also provided opportunities to be helpful on other fronts. Early in 2007, for example, a participant in one of our workshops turned out to be a Taliban commander of some renown. Because he had lost two sons in the fighting, he was despondent and lamented the fact that neither he nor his colleagues knew what America wanted. He said that coming after them with guns left them no recourse but to respond in kind. This exchange ultimately led to an invitation for me to meet with the Taliban's senior leadership to answer his questions, which I did two months later in the mountains of Pakistan.

In a room filled with 57 Taliban commanders and several tribal and religious leaders, I began by telling them that although I was in no way authorized to speak on behalf of the U.S. government, I was there to see if commonly held religious values could provide the basis for developing a confidence-building measure (CBM) that could point the way toward peace. I indicated, however, that for them to be able to participate in such an exercise, they would first need to understand the Western perspective on the conflict. At that point, I told them what America wanted, i.e., for the Taliban to lay down their arms, distance themselves from Al Qaeda, and reconcile with the Karazi government.

A long and spirited discussion followed in which a number of salient questions were asked. Among them were the following: (1) What do the American people want? (2) Why is the US attacking Afghanistan? (3) Why is the US attacking Iraq? and (4) Why is the US supporting Israel? In response, I gave the following replies:

- The American people want to see peace in the region, with stable, democratically elected governments in Afghanistan and Iraq.

- With reference to the three most important values in their culture: hospitality, loyalty, and revenge, I indicated that before certain members of Al Qaeda were recognized as a threat, the United States had offered them hospitality by welcoming them into the country. Then they struck without warning on 9-11. Because of that violation of hospitality, the United States wanted revenge and asked Afghanistan's Taliban government to turn over Al Qaeda's leadership, so they could be brought to justice. They refused, and we attacked. But we did so with a heavy heart, because most Americans have a great deal of admiration and respect for the Afghan people, stemming from their joint struggle against the former Soviet Union.

  I then called their attention to the fact that some tribal leaders were also banding together against Al Qaeda because Al Qaeda has violated their hospitality as well. I suggested that when Al Qaeda is no longer welcome in Afghanistan, the focus of US revenge would likely shift elsewhere.

- On Iraq, I took a bit of license by noting that although there was some debate about that, I felt that it too was a matter of revenge—for Saddam Hussein's earlier attempt to assassinate a president of the United States.

- I indicated that the United States and Israel have a strategic relationship that is unlikely to change anytime soon. What is changing, though, is our increased concern for and support of the Palestinian people; and over time, that will make a difference.

We then broke for prayer and later reassembled in a smaller group to develop a CBM that focused on private development in the western third of the Afghan Province of Nuristan. Although that initiative ultimately failed, the networking associated with it opened the way for ICRD to play an instrumental role several months later in securing the release of 21 Korean missionaries held hostage by the Taliban in Afghanistan. The following is an abbreviated narrative of how this worked.

On July 19, 2007, twenty-three South Korean Presbyterian missionaries were captured by the Taliban while traveling by public bus from Kabul to Kandahar and subsequently held hostage. The Taliban initially demanded that all South Korean forces withdraw from Afghanistan within 24 hours and that the government of Afghanistan (GOA) release all Taliban prisoners. A few days later, they demanded a sum of $100,000 in exchange for the right to contact the hostages via telephone. When the Afghan government refused their demands, the Taliban killed two of the male hostages. At this point, I was asked by Korea's Ambassador to the United States if our Center could do anything to help secure the release of the remaining hostages through religious channels.

In response, we sought the assistance of one of our indigenous partners who had been helping to facilitate our work with the Deobandi madrasas of Baluchistan. He agreed to help and contacted 15 religious leaders who were known to have had some acquaintance with the spokesmen for the captors. He formed them into a makeshift jirga (council of respected elders), which then traveled to Afghanistan's Ghazni province to negotiate with the captors.

With open Qur'ans, the jirga challenged the captors to provide Islamic justification for the kidnapping of innocent victims and asked when they were going to release the women (not an inconsequential question in light of the fact that 18 of the 21 remaining hostages were women). After a week of exerting such pressure, the jirga returned home. Not only had they said all that they came to say in as many ways as they knew how, but they were also quite ill from drinking the local water. Before leaving, however, they extracted three concessions from the captors: (1) that no further harm would come to the hostages while negotiations were taking place, (2) that the captors would release four or five female hostages as a sign of "good intent" and (3) that the captors would meet with the Korean delegation, which had been on-scene for some time to negotiate the release of the hostages.

The captors and the Korean delegates then met; but those negotiations broke down after six days. At this point, our Vice President for Preventive Diplomacy and director of our madrasa enhancement project, prevailed upon Sami-ul-Haq (a member of the Pakistani

Senate, pioneer of the Taliban movement, and leader of the most influential Deobandi madrasa in Pakistan) to contact the captors and argue for release of the hostages. When that failed to bear fruit, he persuaded three ex-Cabinet Ministers of the former Taliban to intervene as well. A re-constituted jirga was then formed consisting of these three gentlemen and four members of the earlier group. The jirga engaged the captors once again; and after a week, the Taliban negotiators agreed to release the remaining hostages.

Following the release, there was considerable speculation about whether or not the Korean government had paid a ransom to facilitate that release. One of the Taliban negotiators mentioned to our team leader that a sizable sum had been offered to free the hostages but that it had been turned down as a matter of religious principle. However, because later evidence suggests that a modest sum was, in fact, paid, it appears that there were competing views on the matter among the captors. Ransom aside, the Taliban negotiators later indicated that had it not been for the religious intervention, they would never have let the hostages go until all of their demands had been fully met. The complete truth may never be known, but the strategy of capitalizing on religious principles appears to have been both sound and helpful.

A more recent instance of faith-based diplomacy occurred in a madrasa in Punjab that is widely known to be a major Al Qaeda feeder. Included among the participants were representatives from a number of madrasas that had been playing a significant role in supporting the Islamic militant movement in Kasmir. During the discussion period, one madrasa leader asked if waging jihad in Kasmir was sanctioned by Islam. Our Wahhabi partner for the project indicated that it was not and said that jihad was only justified when defending the faith but never to acquire territory. This led to a major debate among the madrasa leaders and a consensus conclusion that the fighting in Kasmir was politically motivated, but not religiously sanctioned. Thought is now being given by the madrasa leaders to how they can tone down the militancy of their graduates.

Conclusion

While many in the West advocate the closure of the madrasas, these schools have shown an openness to the kind of change that can ultimately make them more relevant to contemporary challenges. After four years of working with madrasa leaders from across the country, we have reached the point where sufficient momentum has been achieved to take the effort to scale. Among other things, doing so will involve (1) working with selected Pakistani universities to develop a series of university training programs for madrasa leaders that can provide a basis for certification of madrasa faculty and help set the stage for full implementation of the reforms, (2) developing alternative curricula that reflect best educational practices from throughout the Islamic world, (3) securing the necessary funding to modernize the schools and to provide teachers and textbooks in the new disciplines, and (4) providing vocational skills training for the madrasa graduates and facilitating job opportunities for them (by working with chambers of commerce and selected leaders of industry).

It seems clear from this experience that cultural engagement based on a demonstrated respect for the other's values provides far greater leverage for resolving differences than do policies based on isolation and demonization, such as those the U.S. government pursued with respect to Iran under the Bush 43 Administration and, before that, Sudan under the Clinton Administration. Indeed, it was amazing that the madrasa leaders even heard, much less accepted, the points that were made with regard to U.S. foreign policy when we addressed the Karachi and Lahore madrasas in 2006.

Our Center's approach of helping the madrasa leaders to help themselves is already beginning to displace some of the extremist ideas that lead to violence. Ultimately, this initiative will help secure a better future for the children of Pakistan, while getting at the heart of the global war on terrorism in a meaningful way. Here, a caveat is in order. Faith-based diplomacy is not a form of engagement that is well-suited for government practitioners. In the West, the constraints relating to separation of church and state get in the way; and everywhere else (in addition to the West) the government's political agenda inevitably compromises the kind of balanced neutrality that is required to succeed. Hence, the task must fall to religious leaders themselves or to NGOs that are equipped to take it on.

A Final Observation

Just as setting a counter-fire is the best antidote for a blaze that is raging out of control, so too can religious reconciliation become an antidote for religious extremism. In other words, the best antidote for religious ignorance is religious understanding. Making religion part of the solution to intractable conflicts, however, is not without its challenges. Not only does it require a special set of skills, but it is physically, emotionally and psychologically draining. Nor is it without its risks. More than a few spiritually motivated peacemakers have paid the ultimate price. But despite the risks and whatever discomfort one may feel in navigating the relatively uncharted waters of spiritual engagement, the stakes are simply too high for us not to give it our best effort. Only time will tell if we are up to the task.