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Create a New Era of Islamic-Western
Relations; Strategic Insights, v. 3, issue 4
(April 2004)

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Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

Strategic Insights, v.3, issue 4 (April 2004)

<https://hdl.handle.net/10945/11108>

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Create a New Era of Islamic-Western Relations By Supporting Community Development

Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 4 (April 2004)

by [Jason Ben-Meir](#)

Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

In December 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking before an audience at the Heritage Foundation, remarked on the emergence of Islamic extremist movements: "A shortage of economic opportunities is a ticket to despair. Combined with rigid political systems, it is a dangerous brew indeed."^[1] Given the increasingly dangerous world we find ourselves in today, few would argue with this assessment. A year later, Powell visited Morocco, and showing the U.S. government's willingness to back up its words with actions, announced a fourfold increase of economic aid to that country—to roughly \$170 million over three years starting in 2005. Leaving aside for now the size of the aid package, to many the real question is whether the international community, led by the United States, is willing to offer real economic assistance to the poor nations of the Islamic world in the form of aid that directly reaches communities and those most vulnerable to the messages of extremists. Actually, many such development programs already exist. Because they are typically modest in scale, they tend not to receive much attention from policy-makers or the public. It is now time to turn a spotlight on them. For a relatively low cost, far less than that of typical aid programs,^[2] these off-the-radar programs may turn out to be some of the most effective tools we have to combat the discontent that fuels political instability and terrorism. If Western countries vigorously supported this kind of assistance to Islamic nations, an era of regional stability and international security would ensue. Morocco offers a striking example.

Throughout the winter and spring of 2003, meetings among community members, government officials, and NGO representatives were held in the High Atlas Mountains, south of Marrakech. The villages in this region are among Morocco's poorest, with extremely high rates of infant mortality (mostly due to unclean drinking water), illiteracy, and joblessness. Their dependence on fuel-wood for cooking and on grazing animals as their main source of income has contributed to massive deforestation and mountain erosion. The dialogue resulted in a \$10 million development plan for the region. If funded, the plan would significantly help secure the economic, educational, health, and environmental future of 50,000 people by establishing projects in potable water, modern irrigation, fruit and forestry tree planting, school construction, women's cooperatives, food production, mountain terracing, water-generated electricity, and artisanal crafts.

What is the "magic bullet" so to speak of these projects? In general, community-wide participation in the design and management of development projects creates socio-economic progress through a pluralist democratic process. By directly responding to its self-defined needs, the community has a strong incentive to maintain the projects its members establish.

In the process of communities working together to realize their development goals, they also establish local associations (core civil-society institutions) to manage projects and create new ones.^[3] New tiers of cooperation then form as neighboring communities join together in implementing projects beneficial to the entire region.^[4] In brief, achieving local development

through inclusive community dialogue has positive economic and political consequences.^[5] The diverse benefits can be immensely valuable for Middle Eastern and Muslim nations, as they would greatly increase international security by dealing directly with economic and social despair.

The next section will look at some of the countries in the Islamic world and how community-designed development can play an indispensable role in their economic and political transformation and explore the role of Western nations, especially the United States, in this process. Measures that achieve participation in local development across a country are then described.

U.S. and E.U. free trade with Morocco and Jordan

Community-designed development can be extremely effective in combating the harsh effects of free trade, including falling prices for farm products, lower land prices, decreased demand for agricultural laborers, and urban migration.^[6] For instance, under NAFTA, Mexican farmers have experienced many of these effects. Their cereals, grown using traditional methods, cannot compete with Western agricultural production, and with their traditional employment undercut, farmers have been forced to look for work in urban areas. We now understand, however, that diversification of rural income sources can prevent the displacement of farmers caused by free trade. And, in communities designing and implementing their own projects, income diversification has been a result.

Jordan and Morocco reached agreements with the United States and the European Union to phase in lower trade barriers over the next decade or so, which make it now critical that these moderate Islamic countries invest heavily in rural development. As one community member expressed in an open forum meeting in Morocco, "We wouldn't want to move to the cities if we had the means to achieve the goals of our village." Notwithstanding the increase in economic aid announced by Secretary Powell to Morocco, the international community must do more to support locally-designed projects that achieve the development goals of rural people. Thus, it is imperative that American and European ambassadors serving in Morocco and Jordan and their host-country counterparts in Europe and the United States develop a concerted strategy for raising funds to establish local projects. Any effective fundraising strategy would include organizing international donor conferences.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Community-design development might also assist in a critical way in securing peace among Israelis and Palestinians, a goal paramount to achieving regional stability and for putting Western-Islamic relations on a more trusting and productive footing. The current seemingly intractable situation has led most of the Israeli public and leaders to support physical and economic separation from the Palestinians, with the construction of the West Bank wall representing an impossible-to-ignore step in this direction. Some Palestinian officials are now also suggesting that a separation would be acceptable to them, even considering the increased economic hardships that would certainly ensue, if it also included full political separation along acceptable geographic borders.^[7]

The Palestinian economy is completely integrated with, and dependent on, Israel's. During this second Intifada, the trade and labor restrictions (at times, closures) imposed by Israel to enhance its security have wreaked economic havoc on the majority of Palestinians, dramatically underscored Palestinians' economic vulnerability, and further destabilized political relations with Israel. Perhaps more than ever before, the Palestinian people have been ravaged by poverty, declining health, and environmental devastation. Two-thirds now depend on humanitarian aid to survive. Recent studies suggest that, but for the financial support of the international community, primarily the League of Arab States, the Palestinian Authority would have already collapsed.

Approximately seventy-five percent of all imports to the West Bank and Gaza are from Israel and ninety-five percent of all exports from the territories go to Israel.^[8] The West Bank and Gaza are highly dependent on imports, with these accounting for roughly eighty percent of their GDP. Thus, a good deal of economic power is derived, not from local industry, but from the exclusive right to sell imported goods from Israel. Clearly, as seen in trade, a severing of relations between Israelis and Palestinians would be much more traumatic for the Palestinians.^[9]

Before the current uprising, the number of Palestinians working in Israel rose to 150,000, and fell with the closures to just a few thousand. Palestinian labor surveys put the current unemployment rate in the West Bank at a devastating thirty-six percent and in the Gaza strip at forty-eight percent.^[10] Through the 1990s, Israel imported foreign workers from Romania, Thailand, among other countries, and decreased the Palestinian percentage of their labor force from eight to two. Thus, the economic impact of labor closures was much more hurtful to the Palestinians than to Israelis.

Case studies from almost every country show that local and national self-reliance is fostered when community members collaboratively design and implement projects to better their lives.^[11] Self-reliance is generated because interactive dialogue among community members draws forth information from a variety of perspectives, thus increasing the ability of participants to make informed decisions.^[12] Studies also show that self-reliance is encouraged when projects are developed based on local capacities and know-how. But what if the community development approach were widely applied in the West Bank and Gaza? From what we know about other such projects, economic self-reliance would restructure the Palestinian economy.

Israel and the West can generate tremendous good will, and noticeably lessen the short-term Palestinian costs of self-reliance, by directly funding community projects in the West Bank and Gaza designed and managed by local Palestinians. The international community (including the World Bank) should strongly encourage the Palestinian Authority to more actively support local development initiatives. For their part, the international community should support economic de-linking, and not treat it as a contradiction of the Paris protocol, so that the Palestinians can construct a self-reliant economy based on community empowerment. In time, this would help to stabilize Israeli-Palestinian political relations and increase the prospects for peace.

Reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan

The billions spent in reconstruction contracts with foreign companies disempowers local communities and often fosters resentment toward the international coalition, particularly the United States. Rarely do projects requested by local leaders result from a genuine process of community participation. Lessons from development interventions around the world over decades indicate that this sort of development assistance undermines long term sustainability of projects.^[13] Indigenous capacities to manage development cannot reach their potential when local people are not in full control of rebuilding major sectors of their own economic life.

Sustained development and genuine reconstruction require establishing projects designed by *entire* local communities. The very nature of these projects ensures that the needs of local people are being met. And, in turn, local communities maintain these projects because they feel it is in their interest. Funding projects developed by local communities through facilitated interactive dialogue across Iraq and Afghanistan will significantly facilitate economic and political transformation in only a few years.^[14] The process will also marginalize secular and religious extremists in both countries.^[15]

How can community-designed development be applied to improve the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan? Because large-scale reconstruction is essential, meetings characterized by broad public participation should be organized in every community. In these meetings, which require facilitation, local people should first prioritize their development goals and next design projects to

reach those goals. The hundreds of town hall meetings currently being organized at the provincial and neighborhood levels to discuss the transition to self-rule are indeed a positive step. The process of communities designing their own development, however, requires regular meetings and ongoing relationships as projects are implemented.

Members of the community, local teachers, government and NGO personnel, among others, can all be effective facilitators of meetings once they receive training in techniques of consensus building and organizing interactive dialogues. Led by the United States, the coalition partners then need to fund the projects that communities will design, implement, and manage by themselves. This type of funding will strongly encourage the local populations in both countries to assume ownership of the reconstruction of their respective nations—a necessity for overall sustainable economic and political development.

Islamic extremism

Broad participation in community development marginalizes religious and secular political extremists by strengthening indigenous democratic processes (which are themselves more likely to succeed^[16]) that generate economic prosperity. As many experienced observers have noted, inclusive direct dialogue among community members—including women—in planning local development is an inherently political process. Community empowerment occurs through a gradual, non-violent and, as examples show, widely accepted process because of the many collective and individual benefits the community experiences. As people achieve their own interests, they feel less alienation; their zone of tolerance also expands because the underlying conditions that fuel extremism are being directly addressed. Those affected are then less likely to channel hatred toward outside actors. Additionally, in the Muslim world, as the majority of people in communities, regions, and nations come to enjoy the benefits of the local development approach, the more will they be emboldened to fight extremism within their own countries.

Public diplomacy

With the Muslim world's public perception of America at an all-time low, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Margaret Tutwiler, has been given the enormous task of building favorable impressions of the United States. In October 2003, a state department-sponsored study of American public diplomacy in the Muslim world stated that Egyptians are thankful to the Japanese for funding their opera house, but were "unaware that the United States funded the Cairo sewer, drinking water, and electrical system and played a key role in reducing infant mortality." The study notes too that in recent years the United States raised its assistance to Jordan, but this increase was accompanied by a dramatic worsening of public attitudes toward the United States, with just one percent of Jordanians holding a favorable view. Of course, U.S. policies in the Middle East, especially in regards to Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, will greatly determine the success of public diplomacy measures, including educational, media outreach, and interactive programs.

If communities are fully engaged in the design, implementation, and management of projects that influence their daily lives, then foreign aid as a tool of public diplomacy will be effective. Such has not always been the case in the state-to-state aid the United States provides Egypt and Jordan. Communities are generally not involved in determining the investments funded by the United States, and thus the general public is unaware of the magnitude of the foreign aid that is given. American support of locally designed projects generates enormous public good will and as such is an excellent form of public diplomacy. By engaging whole communities, these projects make people feel they are involved in a development process that is for once responsive to their needs. This perception engenders in the beneficiaries feelings of trust and acknowledgement towards those organizations and agencies that have made such an experience possible, including the providers of financial assistance.^[18] Further, the trust that is built offers the opportunity for the United States to explain its intentions in the Middle East to a more receptive audience.

Films and/or videos of community meetings that take place across Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Iraq, Afghanistan, and a future Palestine showing local peoples working together to improve their lives by creating projects funded by the United States, can be powerful tools of public diplomacy. Additionally, these films and videos can be used in training people, such as English teachers, in community development facilitation. During her February 2003 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, former Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs Charlotte Beers called English teachers a "secret weapon," because they are needed everywhere in the world.^[19] Training foreign teachers who work in Muslim nations in consensus building skills will allow them to achieve the potential of their service by helping them use these skills to assist communities in accomplishing their goals and in the process build more productive international partnerships. The U.S. Peace Corps should set the example, by training the roughly 3,500 English teachers who volunteer to serve around the world, in consensus building and facilitation. In brief, there is compelling evidence to suggest that if the international community significantly increased their financial support for community-based economic development managed by local communities, millions of people would be able to realize opportunities that seemed impossible, international relations and security would be significantly strengthened, extremism marginalized, and a horrific clash between the Muslim world and the West averted.

Initiatives that achieve community development across a country

There are plenty of examples around the world of development agencies, both governmental and non governmental, which successfully organize broad participation in a community or group of communities and achieve lasting development. In order to organize participation in communities across a country, however, institutions need to be created whose mission is to help local people design projects that meet their needs and create partnerships among groups that support community development. The following five initiatives will encourage broad participation in the design, management, and support of development projects in communities throughout a country.

1. Establish agencies of coordination

One of the major challenges to achieving inclusive participation in local development is bringing all interested parties into a dialogue process. An "agency of coordination" is an administrative framework that organizes and facilitates meetings among communities, government agencies, and NGOs for planning and implementing development. It has the flexibility to operate at local, provincial, national, and international levels in order to negotiate partnerships to promote community objectives. The composition of the agency is determined by the host-country. An agency of coordination can also have a vital role in facilitating Arab-Israeli development cooperation. For example, several years ago when there was less tension in the Middle East, Moroccan-Israeli collaboration was actually possible. Procedurally, however, initiating it was not easy as it required interested Moroccans to contact the Israeli liaison office in Rabat directly. Many Moroccans, though interested in working with Israel on development projects, feel more comfortable working through a trusted intermediary to establish initial direct contact.^[20] MASHAV (the aid wing of Israel's Foreign Ministry) itself cannot initiate contact, for to do so would constitute interference in Moroccan internal affairs. This situation, which makes direct dialogue difficult to attain, explains in part why in twenty five years of Israeli-Egyptian peace there has been little development cooperation. Indeed, mid-level discussions among Israeli and Arab government officials are difficult to achieve even when the opportunity exists. An agency of coordination (perhaps in this case an international NGO that can contact both Arab and Israeli officials) would be able to catalyze and then help to maintain dialogue until trust is built.

2. Establish community development planning and training centers

These centers, situated in communities and locally managed, facilitate an interactive process that enables communities to determine their priority goals and then to design and implement projects to achieve them. Centers also provide training in facilitation, modern agriculture, health,

fundraising, and other skills desired by the local population. In addition, centers can assist in reconciling conflicts among diverse groups. In sum, they provide one-stop shopping for community development needs and do so in ways that transfer needed skills to the local population. Clearly, training centers can perform a key role in the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan.

3. Nurture democratization

Two fundamental principles of pluralist democracy are the dispersion of power toward the interior (localities) and the inclusion of all social groups in decision making.^[21] Agencies of coordination and community planning and training centers are pluralist democratic institutions because they strengthen the capacities of communities to manage their own development. They are also powerful vehicles for promoting democracy through development assistance.

Community members and leaders who have acquired the skills to achieve collaborative development and experienced its benefits make excellent candidates for local and national elected office. Their experience has been shown to supply them with the confidence and strategies to run for public office.^[22] They have understood that an effective political campaign begins with a series of town hall meetings where local people are given the opportunity to express their concerns and interests. They have also understood that political parties pursuing the development goals of communities will have a good chance of gaining and keeping power because their platform reflects the priorities of local people. They realize too that inclusive collaboration in the design and management of local development opens the door for their nation to achieve its development potential.

Developing this kind of leadership sets the stage for political transformation from within to occur. Delaying too long in building democracy through development assistance in post-conflict areas, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, only allows government officials to become more entrenched and unwilling to give up any of their political power.^[23]

4. Implement fruit and forestry tree planting and irrigation improvements

Around the world, both rural and urban communities regularly identify tree planting as a top priority. Trees provide income, jobs, and enhance food production and the environment. Modern irrigation maximizes the utility of water supplies, increases yield, lays a foundation for potable water, and, by bringing water to land once barren, creates the opportunity for schools, clinics, and other service centers to be built. The international community should fund tree planting and irrigation improvements in viable areas and communities across the Muslim world. An additional reason is that planting a tree is considered an "act of faith" in Islam and as such can instill genuine trust between local people and funding agencies.

In the weeks before the war with Iraq, Margaret Tutwiler, then the U.S. Ambassador to Morocco, took some bold steps and acquired immediate funding from USAID to plant fruit trees in communities in southern Morocco. Creating good will with Arab communities, helping to diversify the incomes of rural farmers in preparation for free trade, and serving the needs of local populations (all of which tree planting does) is an example of public diplomacy at its best.

5. Fund community development

Funding is needed for agencies of coordination, planning and training centers, and, to the greatest degree, for implementing projects local communities design. Besides donor conferences, American ambassadors should appoint special envoys for community development. Their appointment will show that the full weight of the ambassador's office is behind raising funds. These envoys will assist in establishing local projects, such as tree planting, beyond the geographically limited USAID project sites. A wide pool of prospective donors exists who can be

mobilized because multiple sectors (economic, social, health, education, environment, etc.) are advanced in this development approach. As community resources improve, outside funding will become less necessary.

In March 2002, at the United Nations development summit in Mexico, President Bush announced his intention to establish a \$5 billion annual fund by 2008 (added to the \$12.5 billion the United States now gives in foreign assistance) to promote growth through the creation of the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). For MCA to be successful, however, its administrators need to make certain that not just host-government agencies but also local community formulate the ways in which aid money will be invested. Not only will their participation make for more sound development, but it will also serve American public diplomacy objectives.

A second new foreign aid initiative, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), announced by Secretary Powell in December 2002, is designed to address underdevelopment in the Middle East. Its promotion of civil society, education, private sector development, and equal status for women makes it a viable funding vehicle for the development strategy outlined above. But MEPI's fiscal year 2004 budget request of \$145 million is grossly inadequate for it to achieve its development objectives.

Even with MCA and MEPI, the amount of funding to foreign aid is depressingly small, and in no way adequate for achieving U.S. foreign policy goals. Though MCA represents the largest U.S. foreign aid increase in decades and solidifies the U.S. position as the largest donor in the world, foreign aid constitutes about four-and-a-half percent of the annual Defense Department budget. The United States still ranks among the very bottom of the list of twenty-four nations that contribute to overseas aid (contributing about 0.15 percent of our GNP), well short of the goal of 0.7 percent of a nation's GNP set by the U.N. in 1970. Part of the reason there has not been more foreign aid for decades is because only a few studies show a clear correlation between aid flow and economic growth in the countries where it has been distributed. But, as some observers explain, foreign aid has been used to support vain projects, military build-ups, corrupt officials, or strictly geopolitical outcomes.[\[24\]](#)

Foreign assistance in the form of funding community-designed projects across the Muslim world is hardly a futile enterprise; the extremely high success rate of these projects can allow the United States and its partners to help achieve long term peace and progress. For it to work will require at the least doubling the overseas aid contributed by the 24 nations that now together fund roughly \$60 billion a year—something that Britain called for shortly after 9/11. If the United States took the lead and allocated this amount, other nations may be encouraged to follow and a multinational initiative could be created. There is evidence to suggest that there is public support within the nations that give aid for increasing their contributions.[\[25\]](#)

We must also revise funding criteria of donors to make supporting locally defined initiatives the centerpiece. For example, USAID's Middle East Regional Cooperation program (MERC), created as a result of the Camp David peace accords, funds projects that primarily involve Arab-Israeli joint technological development. To advance regional collaboration during this critical time, MERC should decide to fund projects using as its main criteria the quality of Arab-Israeli partnership, regardless of whether a technological development component exists. The transfer of technology is currently a major prerequisite for receiving Israeli MASHAV's assistance. This requirement often seems to Israel's Arab neighbors to serve Israeli interests rather than those people MASHAV is apparently trying to help. In contrast, projects that communities design to meet their own needs typically do not require the imports of technology.[\[26\]](#) When new technology is needed, for example pressure/drip irrigation systems for agricultural communities, it usually involves diffusion of a technology already existing within the country.

Conclusion

The United States should assume the lead in mobilizing the financial resources of the international community (of course, first its own). This new and radical approach—a shift from large-scale aid to the countries themselves or in the form of massive state-controlled projects—to smaller, community-directed initiatives across countries—will reap dramatic benefits. Supporting communities in achieving their self-described goals will marginalize secular and religious extremists, reconstruct Iraq and Afghanistan economically and politically, assist in resolving the seemingly intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and secure the economic future of developing nations engaged in free trade with the West. International security will be strengthened and the U.S. image world wide, particularly in Islamic countries, will improve. In providing a vehicle for successful public diplomacy, the United States will foster an environment where mutual understanding on broader geopolitical issues is more attainable. These profound benefits are achievable by communities creating socio-economically advancing through a pluralist democratic process. By transforming the economic and political landscape, this process can bring peace and prosperity to millions of people. The United States should make funding of community-initiated development its highest priority. In this way, the United States can open the door to a new era of Western-Islamic relations.

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