

Clash of Perceptions: Hostility Perception and the US-Muslim World Relationship

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of hostility perception in conflict and US-Muslim world relations in particular. After exploring perception's role in conflict, the author proposes the hostility perception theory, which states that the perception that the other is hostile toward oneself or one's own group, identity, or culture tends to exacerbate conflict and conflict behaviour. This happens through framing the lens through which actions are viewed, perpetuating self-fulfilling cycles of escalatory behaviour, and creating significant obstacles to problem-solving, relationship-building, and reconciliation. The paper subsequently analyses the role of hostility perception in US-Muslim world relations and the impact that reducing hostility perception can have in improving relations, using survey data and original fieldwork studies. The paper concludes that addressing hostility perception can play a key role in enabling understanding of parties' real interests, needs, and goals; relationship-building; and collaborative problem-solving to improve US-Muslim world relations, and makes recommendations for future analysis and intervention.

Keywords: hostility perception, US-Muslim world relations.

Introduction

Perceptions frame the way we view the world and respond to it, particularly in situations of conflict. How have perceptions of hostility affected the US-Muslim world relationship, and how could changes in perception of hostility contribute to improving US-Muslim world relations?

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The Role of Perceptions in Conflict

Much has been written on the role of perceptions in conflict. Ramsbotham et al. emphasize that contradiction in conflict comes from "actual or perceived 'incompatibility of goals'"¹, while Pruitt and Kim² describe conflict as a "perceived divergence of interest", highlighting the fact that conflict can result even if differences in interests and intentions exist only in perception rather than reality. Parties to a conflict may in fact have compatible or similar goals or interests, but conflict can still arise if they *perceive* that their goals or interests are divergent or incompatible. According to Jeong, "Given that people tend to react to the world according to their own perceptions, subjective understanding can be a more crucial element in shaping conflict behavior than the objectified knowledge of reality."³ Quoting Floyer Acland, Ramsbotham et al. emphasize that people "are not motivated by *facts*, they are motivated by their *perceptions* of the facts, their *interpretations* of the facts, their *feelings* about the facts."⁴

Quite often, such discussions of perceptions in conflict stress the impact of negative perceptions about the other on a party's attitudes and conflict behaviour. As noted by d'Estrée, "Negative feelings and beliefs about the other party lead to negative interpretations of the other party's behavior, reduce contact, make retaliation more acceptable, and result in reduced empathy for the other party."⁵ In particular, perceiving the other as evil or inferior can lead to dehumanisation and subsequent justification of ill-treatment of the other. Says Jeong, "The stigmatization of groups as being morally inferior makes the persecution of antagonists psychologically permissible and even satisfactory...Restraints against malicious acts are not applied to one's enemy, regarded as subhuman, inferior, and dangerous."⁶

Hostility Perception Theory

While much has been written on the impact of perceiving the other negatively on exacerbating conflict, there has been less exploration of the impact of perceiving that the other has negative perceptions of or attitudes toward oneself or one's own group. Yet a key factor affecting conflict is the degree to which parties perceive hostility from the other toward their own group, identity, or culture. When people perceive that a person or group is hostile to them or their identity group, they will often mistrust the other side's intentions, refrain from building relationships,

¹ Oliver Ramsbotham et al., *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2005), 9.

² Dean G. Pruitt and Sung Hee Kim, *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004),

³ Ho-Won Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 80.

⁴ Ramsbotham et al., *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, 290. (emphasis in original)

⁵ Tamra Pearson d'Estrée, "Dynamics", in *Conflict*, ed. Sandra Cheldelin, Daniel Druckman, and Larissa Fast (London: Continuum, 2008), 76.

⁶ Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, 78.

view the other as an adversary rather than a partner for problem-solving and therefore not engage in problem-solving, and react with hostility toward the other group and/or dehumanise the other in return.⁷ The same human "fight or flight" response to perceived threat can lead people to react to perceived hostility by "fighting back" with hostility or aggressiveness of their own, or by withdrawing from the "other" or the situation.⁸

Thus, it is not simply perception of the other as evil or threatening that can affect conflict behaviour. Put simply, what I call the *hostility perception theory* states that the perception that the other is hostile toward oneself or one's own group, identity, or culture tends to exacerbate conflict and conflict behaviour. Some of the ways this occurs include framing the lens through which actions by the other are viewed, perpetuating self-fulfilling cycles of negative and escalatory behaviour, and creating significant obstacles to problem-solving, relationship-building, and reconciliation.

Hostility perception has a large impact on what d'Estrée calls "schemas" – the mental/perceptual constructs which act as "filters" to help us take in and make sense of information.⁹ Attitudes toward the other are linked to our pre-existing schemas, through which any new information is filtered. D'Estrée gives an example: "if I learn that my new neighbor is 'tight with money,' I will code my new neighbor as 'thrifty' if I already had a favorable impression, while if I already had an unfavorable impression I will code the same information as evidence that she is 'miserly.'"¹⁰ When I perceive that the other is hostile to me, any disliked action by the other is interpreted as a manifestation of this hostility. "Do I interpret the late paper as due to unfortunate circumstances, due to procrastination, or due to a rebelliousness toward authority and deadlines?"¹¹ By affecting schemas, hostility perception can lead parties to interpret actions and situations in the worst possible light, and to self-fulfilling prophecies where one expects the other to behave belligerently, takes defensive action and relates negatively to the other, and then ends up producing the very belligerent behaviour in the other that one expected and sought to avoid.¹² As d'Estrée cautions, "interpretations of others' behaviour and intentions filtered through negative, identity-implicating schema direct conflict responses toward increasingly disastrous expressions."¹³

John Limbert, writing on the tumultuous history of American-Iranian relations, describes this dynamic of hostility perception and its self-perpetuating cycle: "Each side sees every move of the other in the worst light possible, and responds accordingly...That view—assuming the worst

⁷ Rebecca Cataldi and Marci Moberg, *The Role of Perception Shifts in US-Muslim Relations: The Case of Online Dialogue*, (Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution—Unpublished, 2009).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ d'Estrée, "Dynamics", 79.

¹⁰ Ibid, 80.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 80-81.

¹³ Ibid, 82.

about each other—has also driven both Iranians and Americans to acts that create self-fulfilling prophecies. Assumptions about hostility create more hostility...Hostile intent is assumed, and both sides find the evidence to fit their assumptions."¹⁴

Hostility perception also creates significant obstacles to addressing the substantive issues of conflict by obscuring the real interests and needs of the parties. Attributing negative actions of the other to hostility or malice can prevent one from understanding the actual root causes, interests, and needs that may be driving those actions – such as fear, lack of security, or economic need. Without this understanding, it will be very difficult to address these issues in a way that meets the underlying interests and needs of the other, thus making it unlikely that the negative behaviour of the other will change. In his approach to problem-solving in conflict, Mitchell emphasizes the importance of helping parties to understand the complexity of the given situation and that "simple explanations for events, policies, and statements will no longer suffice" if the conflict is to be constructively addressed, especially given that "human beings have a tendency to try to make sense of a complex world by using simplifying processes".¹⁵ In addition, if, as described above, a conflict can be driven by actual or perceived incompatibility of goals, it is critical to understand the true goals of the parties in order to determine whether they are in fact incompatible or merely appear to be so, and thus whether a "win-win" solution is possible. Jeong notes that, "Incompatibilities in goals can be more easily managed or removed by the clarification of misunderstandings if the perceived difference is illusory, or is not based on real sources."¹⁶ True resolution/transformation of conflict will constructively address each party's deepest needs and interests, and this is unlikely if hostility perception obscures the understanding of these needs and interests.

Hostility perception also affects the likelihood of problem-solving by influencing attitudes and behaviours of the parties within the problem-solving process. The degree to which the other is seen as hostile to oneself and one's interests affects the degree to which the other will be seen as a rival or enemy as opposed to a partner in the problem-solving process, and thus the degree to which conflict resolution is seen as possible. As d'Estrée notes, "suspicions, mistrust, and negative expectations prevent the parties from considering new options, or even believing them when they see them...each deadlier step occurs when confusing behaviour is interpreted negatively."¹⁷ Jeong also notes that "an enemy's aggressor image" makes it difficult to make concessions.¹⁸

Conversely, addressing and ameliorating perceptions of hostility can increase the likelihood of problem-solving and conflict transformation by enabling a clearer understanding of

¹⁴ John W. Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the Ghosts of History* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2009), x.

¹⁵ Christopher Mitchell, "Problem-solving", in *Conflict*, ed. Sandra Cheldelin, Daniel Druckman, and Larissa Fast (London: Continuum, 2008), 303.

¹⁶ Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, 11.

¹⁷ d'Estrée, "Dynamics", 72.

¹⁸ Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, 180.

the real needs and interests of the other and a belief in the possibility of a cooperative, mutually-acceptable solution. As d'Estrée describes, parties "may discover...that the other group may have been operating out of fear rather than aggression, or that actions that have appeared calculated and with negative intent had arisen from internal group dynamics or even by accident. They may learn more about the other party's operating constraints and internal divisions, and discover a shared desire for resolution."¹⁹ In order to be able to collaborate as partners, both parties need to believe that the other wants to work with them, to know that the other does not hate them, and to trust that the other shares goals in common with them – such as peace and security – even when each party has different ideas about how to reach those goals.²⁰ All of these factors are influenced by hostility perception.

Addressing perceptions of hostility can also reduce the sense of threat and fear that can lead to aggressive reactions and escalation of conflict. As Korostelina says, "the perception of an outgroup as a threat is mostly based on the attribution of negative goals to outgroups through the interpretation of current intergroup relations."²¹ Jeong further describes the relationship between perceptions of the other's intentions and escalation of conflict: "Perceived and actual threats originate from the misinterpretation of intentions or a lack of trust...A high level of escalation is advanced by a variety of socio-psychological processes such as misperception which stimulates the distortion of the other side's traits and motives. Fear anchored in the distrust of the other's intent might encourage provocative actions that prompt escalatory moves...The attribution of adversarial behaviour [sic] to harmful intentions provokes further engagement in a hostile reaction...False expectations and negative perceptions elicit the feared response to become reality as a consequence of inflamed emotions."²²

Addressing perceptions of hostility can also help in the healing and reconciliation process. The realisation that whatever other problems and outstanding issues still exist, one is not necessarily being hated or threatened by the other can help to begin the process of emotional healing as well as to create real hope for the resolution of the conflict and for a better future. This can also help enable the building of relationships, which are often critical to problem-solving and conflict transformation. Gopin's²³ work on citizen diplomacy indicates that the building of relationships plays a critical role in changing consciousness, which is critical to changing structures, which are often critical to addressing root causes of conflict.

Where hostility of the other is perceived rather than factual, initiatives that connect people with each other at the human level can play a powerful role in facilitating understanding of the true feelings, fears, interests, and needs of the other, and thus reducing misperceptions of

¹⁹ d'Estrée, "Dynamics", 87.

²⁰ Cataldi and Moberg, *The Role of Perception Shifts in US-Muslim Relations*.

²¹ Karina V. Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict: Structures, Dynamics, and Implications* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 140.

²² Jeong, *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, 66, 3, 157, 160.

²³ Marc Gopin, *To Make the Earth Whole: The Art of Citizen Diplomacy in an Age of Religious Militancy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 67.

hostility which are so damaging to the process of conflict transformation. It is important to recognise that hostility perception theory in this sense is not the same as contact theory—the issue at stake is not necessarily whether parties' perceptions of the other become more positive as a result of contact, but whether their perceptions of the other's hostility toward them are reduced as a result of contact.

Hostility Perception and the US-Muslim World Relationship

One area in which hostility perception plays a role is in current relations between America and the Muslim world.²⁴ Conflicts in areas such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel-Palestine, as well as issues like terrorism, human rights, and government policies, have contributed to tensions between the United States and many Muslim-majority societies. Such issues will need to be substantively addressed in order to improve and transform the US-Muslim world relationship. The intent of the focus on hostility perception here is not to suggest that addressing hostility perception is a substitute for addressing these issues, but conversely, to suggest that it is an integral part of addressing them.

There are many indications that the issue of perceived hostility is a contributing factor to current tensions between people from the United States and the Muslim world. Akbar Ahmed's extensive field study of perceptions in the Muslim world demonstrates this strikingly, finding that "the distorted perception of Islam in the West...was uppermost in the minds of Muslims when asked what they thought was the most important problem facing Islam. The expected answers – Israel, the plight of the Palestinians, the situation in Iraq – were all overshadowed by the idea that Islam was being maligned in the West."²⁵ Thus, aside from political, economic, or even ideological issues, perception of hostility from another is a very real issue that can lead to intense reactions and exacerbate conflict.²⁶ Yet in both the Muslim world and America, the perception of hostility – that "they hate us" or "they're out to get us" – seems to have a stronger impact on relations than actual hostility. The following opinion poll data, while not exhaustive, proves informative:

²⁴ Here the term "Muslim world" refers to those countries and societies in which Muslims form the majority. While recognising the vast diversity among Muslim-majority countries and in the individual relationships of their governments and people with America, the collective term is used here in light of the discussion of widespread trends and issues which have been found to be affecting American relations with a large number of Muslim-majority societies.

²⁵ Akbar Ahmed, *Journey Into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

²⁶ Cataldi and Moberg, *The Role of Perception Shifts in US-Muslim Relations*.

Muslim World Perceptions of American Hostility:

- The extensive Gallup polling of the world's Muslims in 2007²⁷ found that in response to the question "In your own words, what do you resent most about the West?" one of the top three answers was "hatred of Muslims." Similarly, among the top responses to "What do you admire least about the West?" was "hatred or degradation of Muslims." Respondents "perceive that Western policy toward Muslims is being fueled, at least in part, by the West's disrespect for Islam", and when asked what the West could do to improve relations with the Muslim world, the most frequent responses were "demonstrate more respect; more consideration," "do not underestimate the status of Arab/Muslim countries," and "demonstrate more understanding of Islam as a religion, and do not downgrade what Islam stands for." Abu Dhabi Gallup Center polling of 55 countries between 2006 and 2010 echoed this, finding that only 28% of Muslims believe the West respects them.²⁸
- Polling by WorldPublicOpinion.Org found that large majorities in Muslim countries believe America has goals hostile to Islam and Muslims. On average 79% of those polled believe it is a goal of US foreign policy to "weaken and divide the Islamic world," with majorities ranging from 73% in Indonesia and Pakistan to 92% in Egypt holding this belief.²⁹
- The University of Maryland/Zogby International 2006 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey³⁰ found that 69% believed weakening the Muslim world was an "extremely important" objective of America in the Middle East, while 68% felt that the "desire to dominate the region" was an "extremely important" US objective. This same survey found that 72% of respondents named the United States when asked to choose the two countries "that you think pose the greatest threat to you." In the same polling in 2010, this number went up to 77%.³¹ Similarly, a Gallup/Al Jazeera poll in Pakistan found that 59% of Pakistanis view America as the greatest threat to their country.³²
- The above-mentioned WorldPublicOpinion.Org poll also found that when asked what they felt was the "primary goal" of the US war on terrorism, respondents from the four Muslim-

²⁷ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup, 2007), 88, 61, 160.

²⁸ Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, "Measuring the State of Muslim-West Relations: Assessing the 'New Beginning'", Gallup, Inc., November 28, 2010, 12. http://www12.georgetown.edu/sfs/docs/ACMCU_Measuring_State_Muslim_West_Relations_2010.pdf.

²⁹ WorldPublicOpinion.Org, "Muslim Public Opinion on US Policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda", University of Maryland, 2007, 5. http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START_Apr07_rpt.pdf.

³⁰ University of Maryland/Zogby International, "Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development University of Maryland/Zogby International 2006 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey", University of Maryland, 2006. <http://www.brookings.edu/views/speeches/telhami20070208.pdf>.

³¹ University of Maryland/Zogby International, "2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll", University of Maryland, 2010. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2010/08_arab_opinion_poll_telhami/08_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf.

³² AlJazeera.net, "Exclusive: Al Jazeera-Gallup Pakistan Survey", Al Jazeera, August 13, 2009. <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2009/08/2009888238994769.html>.

majority countries overwhelmingly chose “achieve political and military domination to control Middle East resources” (36%) and “weaken and divide the Islamic religion and its people” (34%), while America’s actual stated goal – “protect itself from terrorist attacks” – was believed by only 16% as the primary goal.³³

- The Abu Dhabi Gallup Center poll found that in 2009 only 34% of respondents in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East/North Africa and 28% of those in Asia believed the West is committed to improving the interaction between the Muslim and Western worlds.³⁴

American Perceptions of Muslim World Hostility:

- According to another 2007 Gallup poll, 80% of Americans believe that people in Muslim countries have an unfavourable opinion of them, and many who have recommendations on ways to improve relations emphasize the need to correct Muslim perceptions or misperceptions of the West. In addition, a top American response to what they least admire about Muslims is that “Muslims are not motivated to be part of, or have relations with, the rest of the world.”³⁵
- Gallup polling also found that “few non-Muslims think the Muslim world respects their societies (24%)”.³⁶
- According to a poll conducted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a vast majority of Americans said they would change their views about Muslims if Muslims condemn terrorism (which is seen as a threat to Americans) more strongly or “show more concern for Americans”.³⁷

Such data indicates that widespread perceptions of hostility from the other exist in both the Muslim world and America. However, other opinion poll data suggests that, whatever tangible problems may remain, this hostility is largely perceived rather than actual.

Muslim World Actual Sentiments:

- According to Gallup poll data, 71% in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East/North Africa feel that the Muslim world respects the Western world, while 61% say the Muslim world is committed to improving Western-Muslim world interaction and that the quality of this interaction is important to them.³⁸

³³ WorldPublicOpinion.Org, “Muslim Public Opinion”, 6.

³⁴ Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, “Measuring the State of Muslim-West Relations”, 22.

³⁵ Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, 159, 158.

³⁶ Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, “Measuring the State of Muslim-West Relations”, 53.

³⁷ Council on American-Islamic Relations, “American Public Opinion About Islam and Muslims”, Council on American-Islamic Relations Research Center, 2006, 2. <http://www.cair.com/PDF/cairsurveyanalysis.pdf>.

³⁸ Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, “Measuring the State of Muslim-West Relations”, 23, 21.

- Other Gallup poll data shows that “one of the statements Muslim respondents most frequently associate with their own societies is ‘eager to have better relations with the West.’” In Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Lebanon, for example, the percentages who say a better understanding between Western and Muslim cultures concerns them a lot outnumbers those who say it does not concern them by a ratio of 2 to 1.³⁹
- In the same Gallup poll, Muslims freely acknowledge that they admire certain things about the West, including freedom, human rights, democracy, equality, justice, hard work, and open-mindedness. The percentage of Muslims who say they admire nothing about the West is significantly lower—including 6.3% in Jordan and 1% in Egypt.⁴⁰

American Actual Sentiments:

- Polling by the Gallup/Coexist Foundation Muslim West Facts Project found that the majority of Americans – 57% - report that they have “no prejudice at all” against Muslims, while those who say they have “a lot” of prejudice are only 9%.⁴¹
- Gallup polling also found that most Americans want better relations with the Muslim world: “[A]lthough many Muslims believe that the West does not show concern for better relations with them, only 11% of Americans say that better relations between the West and the Islamic world do not concern them, contradicting the popular Muslim notion of ‘apathetic Americans.’”⁴² Another Gallup poll found that Americans (78%) were the most likely of all Westerners surveyed to say the quality of Muslim-West relations is important to them.⁴³
- Finally, Gallup polling of 55 Muslim-majority and Western countries found that 59% of respondents felt greater interaction between the West and the Muslim world was a benefit, including 63% in the Middle East/North Africa and 76% of Americans.⁴⁴

The above does not mean hostility does not exist between some people in America and the Muslim world (or that every poll will necessarily reach exactly the same results), but it suggests that this hostility often represents a minority and is not generally as severe as it is perceived to be. Personal fieldwork throughout the Muslim world and the United States has also found, in these cases, actual hostility toward the “other” to be less of an issue than the perception that the “other” is “hostile toward us”, that “they hate us”, “they think we are terrorists”, or “they think we are infidels.” From Egypt to Syria to Pakistan to Indonesia, I have consistently heard Muslims

³⁹ Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, 158.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 140-141.

⁴¹ Gallup/The Coexist Foundation Muslim West Facts Project, “Religious Perceptions in America”, Gallup, Inc., 2010. <http://www.muslimwestfacts.com/mwf/125318/Religious-Perceptions-America.aspx>.

⁴² Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, 158.

⁴³ Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, “Measuring the State of Muslim-West Relations”, 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 11, 24.

express their deep concern about perceived Islamophobia in America and their belief that Americans associate Muslims with terrorism. Grievances including American policies in Israel/Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as difficulties for Muslims in entering the United States, are often seen as manifestations of American hostility to Islam and Muslims. Conversely, Americans often express fear of the Muslim world due to perceived hatred and hostility toward Americans. Acts of terrorism, as well as protests which include chants of "Death to America" and the burning of the American flag, are often seen as manifestations of a broader, general Muslim hostility toward America and Americans. In this climate of perceived hostility, any individual incident, such as the Ft. Hood murders or a new airport regulation, becomes for many a manifestation of a larger American-Muslim conflict. Yet attributing actions to perceived hostility can obscure understanding of the deeper issues, interests, and intentions behind them.

It can also obscure the understanding of how others view issues and why they react as they do. For example, most Americans believe, in the author's point of view, that Al Qaeda was responsible for the 9/11 attacks on their country, and that rightly or wrongly, fear of another attack motivated the US war against the Taliban who harboured Al Qaeda. Many in the Muslim world believe Al Qaeda was not responsible for 9/11,⁴⁵ and thus that fear of another Al Qaeda attack was, perhaps, not the real motivator behind US actions in Afghanistan. Attributing American actions to hostility against Islam and Muslims obscures the understanding of how Americans see their own motivations and intentions in Afghanistan, while attributing Muslim opposition to the Afghan war to hostility against America obscures the understanding of how Muslims see their own motivations and intentions. It is not necessary for all to agree on these issues, but it is important that the people of each region understand how the other views such issues and thus the true motivations behind their reactions to these issues. As Rambotham et al. theorise, "what matters most is what these sometimes surprising combinations of events mean to those who are responsible for taking decisions. We cannot properly explain events unless we understand the mental world of the participants and the connections *they* make between them"⁴⁶, and hostility perception can obscure this.

In fact, the Gallup poll data indicates that people in America and the Muslim world have more in common than they perceive. Highlighting the "mutual perception, or more correctly misperception, that significant percentages on both sides believe the other side does not care" about improving relations, Gallup "data show that only minorities on both sides are unconcerned about better relations between the West and Muslim societies, revealing a clash of ignorance rather than a clash of civilizations."⁴⁷ Gallup further found other commonalities that "shatter...many myths. A significant number of Americans and Muslims believe that religion is or

⁴⁵ WorldPublicOpinion.org, "International Poll: No Consensus On Who Was Behind 9/11", World Public Opinion: Global Public Opinion on International Affairs, 2008. http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/international_security_bt/535.php?nid=&id=&pnt=535&lb=btis&aclid=CP3PzP2I860CFUFN4AodXxC7rQ

⁴⁶ Ramsbotham et al., *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, 111-112.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 157.

ought to be a pillar of their society, informed and guided by the Bible or *Sharia*. Majorities of both groups cite the importance of religion in public life and the preservation of family values. Each group is concerned about its economic future, employment and jobs, and the ability to support its families. Each gives high priority to technology, democracy, the importance of broad political participation, and freedom of speech and social justice. Both strongly support eradicating extremism."⁴⁸ American Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf has also written extensively on the commonalities between many of the deepest traditional values of both America and Islam, such as faith, God-given human rights, equality, meritocracy, individual dignity and responsibility, freedom, and justice.⁴⁹

In the same way that the values of America and the Muslim world are not as different as is often perceived, the interests of each in many conflict situations are also not as different as many perceive them to be. To take the example of Iraq, one of the greatest sources of tension in US-Muslim world relations: It can be argued that the interests and goals of America and most Muslim countries here are largely the same – e.g. an end to violence, security and stability, a government that protects the rights of and is responsive to the needs of the Iraqi people and which is at peace with its neighbours, and the return home of the American troops. However, the *perception* that America and the Muslim world have opposing goals, often clouded by hostility perception – e.g. the perception that America wants to permanently occupy or subjugate Iraq as a way of dominating the Muslim world - can fuel conflict and preclude attempts at collaborative problem-solving to resolve the conflict.

If actions and attitudes of the other are attributed to perceived hostility instead of genuine grievances, concerns, fears, or interests – such as opposition to government policies, fear of terrorism, or desire for security and stability – it is unlikely that these grievances, concerns, fears, and interests will be genuinely understood and constructively and cooperatively addressed, and thus likely that conflict will continue. It has been suggested that most Americans and most Muslims do not harbour hostility or ill-will toward the other, but that they often believe the other harbours hostility and ill-will toward them, leading not to a clash of civilizations but a clash of perceptions.⁵⁰ To transform conflict, it is necessary to transform this clash of perceptions.

How Addressing Hostility Perception can Help Improve US-Muslim World Relations: Lessons from the Field

Addressing hostility perception can enable a real understanding of issues, interests, and intentions; reduce sense of threat; build relationships; facilitate cooperative problem-solving; and increase the likelihood that future problems that may arise will be dealt with constructively

⁴⁸ Ibid, 154-155.

⁴⁹ Feisal Abdul Rauf, *What's Right With Islam is What's Right With America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

⁵⁰ Rebecca Cataldi, *Identity and the US-Al Qaeda Conflict*, (Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution—Unpublished, 2009).

through mechanisms of partnership. How can hostility perception be addressed to play a constructive role in improving US-Muslim world relations? Involvement of “ordinary” citizens is particularly critical, because (1) governments, while having the ability to impact perceptions of hostility through policy and public diplomacy, are often distrusted, leading sincerity and motivations behind even seemingly positive acts to be questioned, and (2) for perceptions of hostility to change on a level widespread enough to impact conflict, these perceptions often need to change at the grassroots level, thus influencing the national consciousness of a country or group. Thus, here we will explore lessons learned from three citizen diplomacy programmes that engaged people from America and the Muslim world – a dialogue programme between undergraduate students from various Western and Muslim-majority countries, a professional development programme that brought Pakistani madrasa (Islamic school) teachers on a short-term visit to the United States, and an academic exchange and exposure visit by American graduate students to Syria. While further research is needed beyond these specific cases, they can form a starting point for further exploration of the role of hostility perception and how it can be addressed to play a constructive role in improving US-Muslim world relations.

Western-Muslim World Dialogue: The Soliya Connect Programme

Dialogue can play a powerful role in rectifying misperceptions about others' feelings, values, motivations, and especially hostility. It can help to build relationships through the sharing of deep emotions and personal stories; provide opportunities for healing through expressions of acknowledgment, care, and greater understanding; and illuminate core issues as well as differences and similarities in views on those issues, which can provide the basis for identifying recommended collaborative actions to address those issues.⁵¹ The Soliya Connect Programme enables university students in Western and Muslim-majority countries to collaboratively explore the relationship between their regions with the aim of improving intercultural awareness and understanding. Students participating in the programme from a variety of countries “meet” weekly in small groups of 8-10 members throughout the course of a semester via Soliya's online videoconferencing technology.

The Soliya programmes discussed here explored various themes, including identity; the nature of the current West/US-Muslim world relationship and key issues affecting this relationship; stereotypes and images of the “other”; culture and cultural values; the influence of the media on the relationship; and specific socio-political issues such as the integration of Muslims in Western societies and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Participants also had opportunities to share their personal interests (including hobbies and favourite elements of pop culture), experiences, and future life goals. Students were also required to complete collaborative projects by partnering with someone from the other region through blog or video post exchanges or interviewing their partner's friends on Facebook.

⁵¹ Rebecca Cataldi, *Reflection Paper on Syria Course and the Field of Citizen Diplomacy*, (Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution—Unpublished, 2010).

In the dialogues it was found that perceived hostility from the “other” was an important issue for many of the students, and that many of the students said they wanted to participate in the programme because they wanted to improve the images of their countries or cultures abroad.⁵² We also saw these perceptions of hostility change through participation in the programme. One of the factors that seemed to contribute to changes in perceptions of hostility from the other was expressions of appreciation for the interests of the other or of concern for the well-being of the other.⁵³ For example, American expressions of concern for the Palestinians and their interests had an impact on Muslim perceptions. In the last session of the dialogue group, when asked what they had learned through personal interaction that they felt contributed to better US-Muslim relations, one Palestinian-Jordanian participant highlighted, “I never knew that American people don’t like the Israelis to be in Palestine.”⁵⁴

Another factor with the power to contribute to reduction in hostility perception was the realization of areas of common values and common intentions.⁵⁵ Students commented that, “we all have common interests and goals in terms of where we are going,” “we have a common interest in trying to change perceptions in both parts of the world,” and “we all have similar views on how to reach peace.”⁵⁶

In discussing the impact of the programme, participants emphasized numerous ways in which their perceptions of hostility from the other had changed:⁵⁷

- One Muslim participant said that she had previously thought that all Americans were biased against Muslims, but that after the discussion she felt that there are Americans who “feel as we do”.
- A Western student stated that “just because a country has some aspects that the country [where] you live dislikes, that doesn’t mean the people inside the country feel the same.”
- An Arab participant expressed realisation that “most of you [Americans] care what happens in Arab countries”.
- An American student said she had learned more about the Palestinians through the programme and had come to sympathise with them, and stated, “[J]ust through talking to each other I learned we can break down the stereotypes we may have.”
- In the final session, one Muslim participant stated that before the programme began, she had “thought Americans just think we are all terrorists...but...I [now] feel the Americans feel as

⁵² Cataldi and Moberg, *The Role of Perception Shifts in US-Muslim Relations*.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

we do...I realised that both Americans and Arabs/Muslims think the same; they are all against war."

- Another Muslim participant expressed similar thoughts: "At first I thought American people hate or dislike Arabs...but now...I realised they do feel with us and have the same thoughts as we have...I talk differently about Americans now and understand them better and am not afraid as before...I now know that Americans don't hate us, even if they may have misunderstandings about us."

Students also indicated that this dialogue experience, and the ways it had reduced perceptions of hostility, had given them greater hope and optimism about US/West-Muslim world relations, had helped them realise that "ordinary" people can play a powerful role in improving relations, and had motivated them to take action in promoting positive interaction between the people of America and the West and the Muslim world.⁵⁸

- One Muslim student said she would like to start assisting a programme through which Americans learn Arabic in her country, while continuing to learn English.
- One Western student, who at the beginning had expressed concern about anti-Western sentiment in other cultures, said that after this programme he had the desire to visit the Middle East, because "I feel people there are not so different from people in Europe." (In the final session, many of the students in the group did invite the others to visit their countries or even to stay in their homes.)
- An American student wrote: "I think this...project will make me want to actually see other culture's [sic] more directly instead of trying to guess what they are like based off of [sic] what I read in newspapers or in books."
- Another Muslim participant mentioned that she would now like to go to America on an exchange programme and stay at an American's home to learn about them, something she would have been afraid to do before the programme: "I think I will talk differently about Americans...I became more interested in getting involved in new activities through this Soliya programme, for example, to go to America and stay in someone's house...before the Soliya programme I may not have done that, but after this programme I understand Americans more and love them more and would like to go on such a programme."

Muslim World Visit to America: Professional Development Programme for Pakistani Madrasa Leaders

Currently many perceptions of hostility exist between Pakistanis and Americans. Since such perceptions are particularly strong at the grassroots level, community leaders, educators, religious leaders, and other opinion leaders have a powerful potential to influence such perceptions. Since 2004, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) has been

⁵⁸ Ibid.

engaging Pakistani madrasa leaders to enhance their ability to be religious educators and peacemakers, through teacher-training workshops which promote educational enhancement, pedagogical and critical thinking skills, religious tolerance, and conflict resolution skills. In early 2010, ICRD brought a delegation of Pakistani madrasa and religious leaders on a three-week visit to the United States to enable them to explore Islamic and religious education in America; receive professional development training in facilitation skills, working with diversity, and conflict resolution; explore how religious and citizen groups can contribute to peace-building and civil society; and build relationships with their American counterparts, while promoting greater intercultural understanding. The programme included a week of intensive training at World Learning's School of International Training in Vermont; visits to various educational institutions, American Islamic organisations, and religious leaders; a presentation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies; and meetings with various US government agencies and officials, including Muslim Congressman Keith Ellison.

In discussing the impact of the programme, Pakistani delegation members⁵⁹ repeatedly emphasized ways in which perceptions of American hostility had changed through first-hand exposure to America and American people. For instance, the delegation leader highlighted the impact on the delegation of witnessing the role played by Islamic institutions in American society: “[We saw] that Muslim organisations have the same rights and status as Christian and Jewish institutions that has to be seen first-hand to see the true value of America...[This will produce] long-term impact...slow but real change.”

The delegation highlighted dialogue with Americans, which involved deep listening to each other, as one of the most powerful experiences of the program, which contributed to their understanding that Americans share many of their concerns (such as regarding the impact of US drone strikes in Pakistan and for Pakistani lives lost in the war on terror), that the values of the United States and Islam are not inherently opposed, and that it is possible to be both a devout Muslim and an active participant in American society. The desire of university students as the next generation of American leadership to learn more about the realities of madrasas and to improve Pakistani-American relations had a particularly deep impact on the delegation. Delegation members emphasized:

- “[T]he respect these students gave for our sentiments, feelings, and ideas gave me tremendous hope that students, the next generation, will lead US-Pakistan relations in the right direction.”
- “One of the biggest fears we had when we came here was how Americans would receive us – we thought they would have anger and hatred toward us, but that feeling has been completely changed. We realise Americans are loving and kind toward us...I have felt respected here...I felt love here and that's what I'll take back...When I go back I intend to tell

⁵⁹ Feedback data from Americans with whom the Pakistani delegation interacted was generally not collected during this program; hence, all comments on perception changes here are from Pakistani delegation members.

the people of Pakistan that we should not look at the US government and policy only, but we should understand the mind-set and the goodness of the American people as well...There should be much bigger exchanges like this beyond this small group."

- "[Before I came here] I thought America is the enemy...[other] people [in Pakistan] worried about me, they thought America is the enemy, but [after coming here] now I know this is not true...I feel the people here are good, I feel love here, and I love you. This changed my way of thinking...I hope this group becomes bigger and that ICRD can do more of these programmes on a larger scale."

Participants also emphasized that their experience had given them greater optimism about the prospects for improving US-Pakistani relations, and highlighted ways they felt their experience would impact their actions when they returned to Pakistan:

- "After the dialogue with the American students, my belief became stronger that...to improve US-Pakistan relations is...achievable – our efforts can be successful in achieving peace and moving in the right direction."
- "We [Pakistanis and Americans] learned from each other – two-way learning. I intend to go back to Pakistan and present the goodness and positive side of America. I also hope that what Americans have learned from our visit here, that the good side of that will be spread among their circles here. We can't depend on the government to do this; this can only be done by people-to-people contact."
- "When the delegation members return to Pakistan and train other people, there will be long-term impact in terms of changes in ways of thinking, priorities, and syllabus. [After coming here], these trainers will look at other people and other nations in a different light...They now understand that there are multiple viewpoints and ways of living in this world. Now being more tolerant, open-minded, and respectful of others will be priorities...They will present subjects differently to madrasa students, with a more positive message that will bring major positive change in the long run."
- After returning to Pakistan, one delegation member wrote: "[O]ne thing that sparks constantly is my desire to take up any practical work which could serve...[as] a bridge between [the] peoples of our countries...[W]e must not wait for our Governments' decisions and actions, rather people-to-people connections can...[work] wonders. I am trying to portray... [good things] about American people over here and you might...not believe...how good it is being taken by the audience. So even a single man can create [a] difference."

American Visit to the Muslim World: Academic Exchange and Citizen Diplomacy Programme in Syria

A key power and strength of citizen diplomacy lies in its ability, through facilitating meaningful interaction between citizens of different groups, to dispel misperceptions of hostility that are so damaging to relations. In 2010, the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution's

Center for Religion, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution facilitated a citizen diplomacy visit of American graduate students to Syria, where American and Syrian students studied principles of citizen diplomacy and conflict resolution together, met with religious and government leaders, socialized together, and engaged in collaborative reflection, visioning, and action planning on what they could do to positively impact the US-Syrian relationship.

Here again, in speaking about the impact of the programme, participants consistently mentioned ways in which it had reduced their perceptions of hostility attributed to the other. American students continually remarked on the incredible hospitality they had received from the Syrians. One American student described the treatment received from the Syrians as “more than a handshake...it was an embrace.”⁶⁰ Syrian students also shared ways in which their perceptions of American hostility toward them had changed as a result of their interactions with American citizens during the programme:⁶¹

- “Before you came I thought you Americans hate us, dislike us, don't care about us. So I planned to stay only the first day. But when you come and greet us...” (This student ended up staying the whole week and going out with the American students almost every night as well). “Now I feel we are brothers. Our countries are missing the people connection – if it were in my power I would do this exchange 3-4 times a year.”
- “Before you came here, I thought you agree with your government and want war here, but now I know different[ly].”
- “During Bush[’s time in office], a US Institute of Peace person came to speak to our class, and we said we wanted exchange but didn’t think anything would happen because of the stereotype of American thinking that they wanted war. But when you came, my thinking about Americans changed 100%...[because] I saw your eyes, the first time you introduced yourselves – I saw how excited you were to be in Syria.”

The importance of addressing hostility perception for improving US-Syrian relations was summed up pointedly by one of the Syrians: “There’s an image that America hates us, we hate them...this is a wall of fear. To tear down this wall, we need to get to know each other; each time we do this, we take down a piece of the wall.” Such citizen diplomacy programmes have the power to facilitate the tearing down of this wall piece by piece, citizen by citizen, building a “critical mass” that can break through barriers and obstacles which prevent the deep transformation of conflict.⁶² Breaking down this wall of misperception can open the door for concrete action to follow. By the end of this programme, students had expressed desires to expand these exchanges, to challenge misperceptions of the other in their home communities (in particular, American students resolved to challenge misperceptions of Syria in America), to do more research before believing “conspiracy theories”, and to collaborate on projects to improve

⁶⁰ Cataldi, *Reflection Paper on Syria Course and the Field of Citizen Diplomacy*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

US-Syrian relations. Some ideas discussed by the students during brainstorming and action planning sessions included creating a website to assist Americans wanting to study in Syria and Syrians wanting to study in America, publishing messages of friendship, and collaborating to help Iraqi refugees.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is important to recognise that the above-described positive changes in hostility perception do not mean that issues of conflict such as government policies or acts of terrorism have disappeared or that people have stopped caring about them. However, as a result of reduction in hostility perception, people have become better equipped and positioned to collaboratively and constructively address these issues, through deeper understanding of the real interests of the other and how issues are viewed by the other, a new view of the other as a collaborative partner rather than a hostile rival or enemy, and new relationships and skills to enable collaborative problem-solving. As perceptions of hostility change, specific conflicts like those in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel and Palestine can be seen for what they are – not part of a larger American-Muslim war, but individual mutual problems to be solved cooperatively.⁶³

There remains yet much to be explored about hostility perception and its role in exacerbating or mitigating conflict and impacting US-Muslim world relations. The following are some recommendations in this regard:

Further Research

Further research should be done into how a different view of the other's intentions and interests would affect views of the other and attitudes toward US-Muslim world relations. For example, the next global opinion survey of Muslim-majority countries could include questions such as, "If you believed that the actions of America in Afghanistan were motivated primarily by a desire to protect itself from terrorist attacks and to help build a more stable Afghan society that protects the Afghan people, how would that affect your views of the United States and of US-Muslim relations?" More follow-up research is also needed on the impact of citizen diplomacy programmes to assess the degree to which reduction in hostility perception leads to concrete action to resolve issues of conflict, the conditions under which this is most likely to occur, and how the link between perception shift and positive action can be strengthened.

Enhancement/Expansion of Citizen Diplomacy Initiatives

Programmes like those described above, which facilitate constructive exposure to the other, address hostility perception, and promote dialogue, greater mutual understanding of interests and issues, relationship-building, and collaborative problem-solving, should be facilitated at all levels between America and Muslim-majority countries, including with policy

⁶³ Cataldi, *Identity and the US-Al Qaeda Conflict*.

leaders, community leaders, religious leaders, educators, students, the media, and citizens at the grassroots.

Connection of Citizen Diplomacy and Reduction in Hostility Perception to Action at the Policy Level

Reduction in hostility perception at the citizen level may not automatically translate to positive changes in government policies or actions, or to more realistic understanding of why existing policies or actions are occurring.⁶⁴ Cheldelin and Lyons advocate that initiatives such as problem-solving workshops and conflict resolution training focus on "unofficial but influential" representatives who can influence policymaking, so that "changes in attitudes, perceptions, and skills, and relationship- and trust-building within a small group can translate to the level of policy-makers who have a role in making decisions relating to conflict behavior."⁶⁵

The field of citizen diplomacy should thus explore ways to connect the successes of its methods and initiatives in reducing hostility perception, building understanding, building relationships, and inspiring collaborative action to the government and policy level.⁶⁶ It is worth exploring the methodologies used in citizen diplomacy programmes that could be applied to facilitating people-to-people exchanges at the government level. If reduction of hostility perception and meaningful relationships built on realistic understanding of deeper interests could be developed on a personal level among government officials, it would be much more difficult for those officials to implement or advocate for militaristic or hostile policies toward the other, or to cut off communication when difficulties occur.⁶⁷ Given the difficulties and sensitivities in many governments of engaging with members of other governments on such a personal level, another option could be for governments to require or encourage new hires to participate in people-to-people citizen diplomacy programmes with people entering government service in countries where relations are endangered before they officially enter government service.⁶⁸ This would enable these personnel to participate in these programmes strictly as citizens (without yet being "tainted" by government service, while also offering deniability to governments where desired), but to immediately after be able to apply what they had learned and the relationships they had developed to their work at the policy level.⁶⁹ It would also be useful to explore possibilities for involving both citizens and government officials together in initiatives that provide opportunities for reduction in hostility perception, dialogue, relationship-building, and cooperative action.

⁶⁴ Cataldi, *Reflection Paper on Syria Course and the Field of Citizen Diplomacy*.

⁶⁵ Sandra Cheldelin and Terrence Lyons, "Facilitation and Consultation", in *Conflict*, ed. Sandra Cheldelin, Daniel Druckman, and Larissa Fast (London: Continuum, 2008), 326-327.

⁶⁶ Cataldi, *Reflection Paper on Syria Course and the Field of Citizen Diplomacy*.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Mechanisms for Facilitating US-Muslim World Collaborative Action in Resolving Issues of Conflict

One possibility that could be explored is the formation of an “American-Muslim World Advisory Council”, made up of civil society, religious, and other non-governmental leaders of Muslim countries and their American counterparts, which would meet regularly and make recommendations to the US government about policies to address conflict/other issues and improve US-Muslim world relations.⁷⁰ As well as serving as a problem-solving mechanism, this would empower greater participation from citizens of both regions in addressing these issues and enable citizens of America and the Muslim world to build a relationship of cooperation and partnership.⁷¹

Many of the deepest values, interests, needs, and goals of citizens in the United States and the Muslim world are more similar to each other than both parties realise. Yet perceptions of hostility commonly held by both parties – such as that a conflict exists between their fundamental values or civilizations, or that the “other” hates them or wishes to cause them harm – obscure these similarities and contribute to exacerbating conflict and worsening relations between both cultures. Addressing hostility perception, particularly through constructive initiatives that engage people of both regions, has a critical role to play in addressing issues of conflict and improving relations between these regions.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.