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Reaching Out Quietly to Muslims in America

By **ANDREA ELLIOTT**

When President Obama took the stage in Cairo last June, promising a new relationship with the Islamic world, Muslims in America wondered only half-jokingly whether the overture included them. After all, Mr. Obama had kept his distance during the campaign, never visiting an American mosque and describing the false claim that he was Muslim as a “smear” on his Web site.

Nearly a year later, Mr. Obama has yet to set foot in an American mosque. And he still has not met with Muslim and Arab-American leaders. But less publicly, his administration has reached out to this politically isolated constituency in a sustained and widening effort that has left even skeptics surprised.

Muslim and Arab-American advocates have participated in policy discussions and received briefings from top White House aides and other officials on health care legislation, foreign policy, the economy, [immigration](#) and national security. They have met privately with a senior White House adviser, [Valerie Jarrett](#), Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#) and Attorney General [Eric H. Holder Jr.](#) to discuss civil liberties concerns and counterterrorism strategy.

The impact of this continuing dialogue is difficult to measure, but White House officials cited several recent government actions that were influenced, in part, by the discussions. The meeting with Ms. Napolitano was among many factors that contributed to the government’s decision this month to end a policy subjecting passengers from 14 countries, most of them Muslim, to additional scrutiny at airports, the officials said.

That emergency directive, enacted after a failed Dec. 25 bombing plot, has been replaced with a new set of intelligence-based protocols that law enforcement officials consider more effective.

Also this month, Tariq Ramadan, a prominent Muslim academic, visited the United States for the first time in six years after Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) reversed a decision by the Bush administration, which had barred Mr. Ramadan from entering the country, initially citing the U.S.A. [Patriot Act](#). Mrs. Clinton also cleared the way for another well-known Muslim professor, Adam Habib, who had been denied entry under similar circumstances.

Arab-American and Muslim leaders said they had yet to see substantive changes on a variety of

issues, including what they describe as excessive airport screening, policies that have chilled Muslim charitable giving and invasive **F.B.I.** surveillance guidelines. But they are encouraged by the extent of their consultation by the White House and governmental agencies.

“For the first time in eight years, we have the opportunity to meet, engage, discuss, disagree, but have an impact on policy,” said James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute in Washington. “We’re being made to feel a part of that process and that there is somebody listening.”

In the post-9/11 era, Muslims and Arab-Americans have posed something of a conundrum for the government: they are seen as a political liability but also, increasingly, as an important partner in countering the threat of homegrown terrorism. Under President **George W. Bush**, leaders of these groups met with government representatives from time to time, but said they had limited interaction with senior officials. While Mr. Obama has yet to hold the kind of high-profile meeting that Muslims and Arab-Americans seek, there is a consensus among his policymakers that engagement is no longer optional.

The administration’s approach has been understated. Many meetings have been private; others were publicized only after the fact. A visit to **New York University** in February by **John O. Brennan**, Mr. Obama’s chief counterterrorism adviser, drew little news coverage, but caused a stir among Muslims around the country. Speaking to Muslim students, activists and others, Mr. Brennan acknowledged many of their grievances, including “surveillance that has been excessive,” “overinclusive no-fly lists” and “an unhelpful atmosphere around many Muslim charities.”

“These are challenges we face together as Americans,” said Mr. Brennan, who momentarily showed off his Arabic to hearty applause. He and other officials have made a point of disassociating Islam from terrorism in public comments, using the phrase “violent extremism” in place of words like “jihad” and “Islamic terrorism.”

While the administration’s solicitation of Muslims and Arab-Americans has drawn little fanfare, it has not escaped criticism. A small but vocal group of research analysts, bloggers and others complain that the government is reaching out to Muslim leaders and organizations with an Islamist agenda or ties to extremist groups abroad.

They point out that Ms. Jarrett gave the keynote address at the annual convention for the **Islamic Society of North America**. The group was listed as an unindicted co-conspirator in a federal case against the **Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development**, a Texas-based charity whose leaders were convicted in 2008 of funneling money to **Hamas**. The society denies any links to terrorism.

“I think dialogue is good, but it has to be with genuine moderates,” said Steven Emerson, a terrorism analyst who advises government officials. “These are the wrong groups to legitimize.” Mr. Emerson and others have also objected to the political appointments of several American

Muslims, including Rashad Hussain.

In February, the president chose Mr. Hussain, a 31-year-old White House lawyer, to become the United States' special envoy to the [Organization of the Islamic Conference](#). The position, a kind of ambassador at large to Muslim countries, was created by Mr. Bush. In a video address, Mr. Obama highlighted Mr. Hussain's status as a "close and trusted member of my White House staff" and "a hafiz," a person who has memorized the Koran.

Within days of the announcement, news reports surfaced about comments Mr. Hussain had made on a panel in 2004, while he was a student at Yale Law School, in which he referred to several domestic terrorism prosecutions as "politically motivated." Among the cases he criticized was that of Sami Al-Arian, a former computer-science professor in Florida who pleaded guilty to aiding members of a [Palestinian](#) terrorist group.

At first, the White House said Mr. Hussain did not recall making the comments, which had been removed from the Web version of a 2004 [article](#) published by a small Washington magazine. When Politico obtained a recording of the panel, Mr. Hussain acknowledged criticizing the prosecutions but said he believed the magazine quoted him inaccurately, prompting him to ask its editor to remove the comments. On Feb. 22, The Washington Examiner ran an editorial with the headline "Obama Selects a Voice of Radical Islam."

Muslim leaders watched carefully as the story migrated to Fox News. They had grown accustomed to close scrutiny, many said in interviews, but were nonetheless surprised. In 2008, Mr. Hussain had co-authored a [paper](#) for the [Brookings Institution](#) arguing that the government should use the peaceful teachings of Islam to fight terrorism.

"Rashad Hussain is about as squeaky clean as you get," said Representative Keith Ellison, a Minnesota Democrat who is Muslim. Mr. Ellison and others wondered whether the administration would buckle under the pressure and were relieved when the White House press secretary, [Robert Gibbs](#), defended Mr. Hussain.

"The fact that the president and the administration have appointed Muslims to positions and have stood by them when they've been attacked is the best we can hope for," said Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America.

It was notably different during Mr. Obama's run for office. In June 2008, volunteers of his campaign barred two Muslim women in headscarves from appearing behind Mr. Obama at a rally in Detroit, eliciting widespread criticism. The campaign promptly recruited Mazen Asbahi, a 36-year-old corporate lawyer and popular Muslim activist from Chicago, to become its liaison to Muslims and Arab-Americans.

Bloggers began researching Mr. Asbahi's background. For a brief time in 2000, he had sat on the

board of an Islamic investment fund, along with Sheikh Jamal Said, a Chicago imam who was later named as an unindicted co-conspirator in the Holy Land case. Mr. Asbahi said in an interview that he had left the board after three weeks because he wanted no association with the imam.

Shortly after his appointment to the Obama campaign, Mr. Asbahi said, a Wall Street Journal reporter began asking questions about his connection to the imam. Campaign officials became concerned that news coverage would give critics ammunition to link the imam to Mr. Obama, Mr. Asbahi recalled. On their recommendation, Mr. Asbahi agreed to resign from the campaign, he said.

He is still unsettled by the power of his detractors. "To be in the midst of this campaign of change and hope and to have it stripped away over nothing," he said. "It hurts."

From the moment Mr. Obama took office, he seemed eager to change the tenor of America's relationship with Muslims worldwide. He gave his first interview to [Al Arabiya](#), the Arabic-language television station based in Dubai. Muslims cautiously welcomed his ban on torture and his pledge to close Guantánamo within a year.

In his Cairo address, he laid out his vision for "a new beginning" with Muslims: while America would continue to fight terrorism, he said, terrorism would no longer define America's approach to Muslims.

Back at home, Muslim and Arab-American leaders remained skeptical. But they took note when, a few weeks later, Mohamed Magid, a prominent imam from Sterling, Va., and Rami Nashashibi, a Muslim activist from Chicago, joined the president at a White-House meeting about fatherhood. Also that month, Dr. Faisal Qazi, a board member of [American Muslim Health Professionals](#), began meeting with administration officials to discuss [health care reform](#).

The invitations were aimed at expanding the government's relationship with Muslims and Arab-Americans to areas beyond security, said Mr. Hussain, the White House's special envoy. Mr. Hussain began advising the president on issues related to Islam after joining the White House counsel's office in January 2009. He helped draft Mr. Obama's Cairo speech and accompanied him on the trip. "The president realizes that you cannot engage one-fourth of the world's population based on the erroneous beliefs of a fringe few," Mr. Hussain said.

Other government offices followed the lead of the White House. In October, Commerce Secretary [Gary Locke](#) met with Arab-Americans and Muslims in Dearborn, Mich., to discuss challenges facing small-business owners. Also last fall, Farah Pandith was sworn in as the State Department's first special representative to Muslim communities. While Ms. Pandith works mostly with Muslims abroad, she said she had also consulted with American Muslims because Mrs. Clinton believes "they can add value overseas."

Despite this, American actions abroad — including civilian deaths from drone strikes in Pakistan and the failure to close Guantánamo — have drawn the anger of Muslims and Arab-Americans.

Even though their involvement with the administration has broadened, they remain most concerned about security-related policies. In January, when the [Department of Homeland Security](#) hosted a two-day meeting with Muslim, Arab-American, South Asian and Sikh leaders, the group expressed concern about the emergency directive subjecting passengers from a group of Muslim countries to additional screening.

Farhana Khera, executive director of [Muslim Advocates](#), pointed out that the policy would never have caught the attempted shoe bomber [Richard Reid](#), who is British. “It almost sends the signal that the government is going to treat nationals of powerless countries differently from countries that are powerful,” Ms. Khera recalled saying as community leaders around the table nodded their heads.

Ms. Napolitano, who sat with the group for more than an hour, committed to meeting with them more frequently. Ms. Khera said she left feeling somewhat hopeful.

“I think our message is finally starting to get through,” she said.