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Action Not Words: Obama's Opportunity to Transform U.S.-Muslim Relations

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Abstract: Newly inaugurated President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Barack Obama made his diplomatic debut promoting conflict transformation between the United States and the international Muslim community following eight years of U.S. militarized intervention in the Middle East. Since Obama demonstrated an acute knowledge of its necessity and the mechanisms for transforming the quality of relations, we evaluate whether his actions were consistent with his message. This article first maps the conflict relationship by examining public opinion to identify the roots of the bilateral conflict relationship. It then identifies mechanisms and policies implemented by Barack Obama to determine when and if they aligned with his conciliatory rhetoric. We determine that Obama's legacy among the international Muslim community will be one of opportunity lost, as his administration ultimately failed to operationalize and institutionalize the promised program likely due to domestic and regional influences.

Keywords: conflict transformation; U.S. foreign policy; public opinion; intercultural relations

1. Introduction

Anne-Marie Slaughter (2008) argued that President George W. Bush's successor should admit that the United States (U.S.) government had "made serious, even tragic, mistakes in the aftermath of September 11". Slaughter recommended this acknowledgment to demonstrate U.S. political humility, self-criticism, and a desire to transform its approach toward the international community. Admission of wrongdoing and the qualitative transformation associated with such a public admission were theorized to positively influence international public opinion of the United States following nearly a decade of contentious U.S. foreign policy perpetrated under the aegis of the global war on terrorism.

From this perspective, the 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama as U.S. President presented an opportunity for qualitative alteration of U.S. behavior and, in turn, its international standing. The propensity for change was initially anticipated by Muslims, since Obama was rhetorically softer while articulating his approach to Middle East-U.S. relations in comparison to his predecessor (Feste 2011; Totman and Hardy 2016). For instance, during a speech to U.S. Marines in 2009, Obama (2009b) asserted that the United States and Iraq "can build a lasting relationship founded upon mutual interests and mutual respect." A similar conciliatory reference to macro level relations was made to an audience in Cairo, Egypt in June 2009, where Obama (2009a) acknowledged that the "cycle of suspicion and discord [between Arab/Muslims and the United States] must end." To circumvent the trends of discord and suspicion denoted, Obama proposed "a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground" (Obama 2009a). These quotes make it clear that Obama recognized the need for altering U.S. behavior and perceptions, and understood how a symmetrical relationship with Muslim majority countries throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia could be advanced.

Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) welcomed Obama's message of conciliation (Feste 2011; Totman and Hardy 2016). Anticipation was further bolstered in Jakarta, Indonesia,

in November 2010, when Obama repeated his determination to modify the manner in which his administration interacted with the international Muslim community (Obama 2010a). Seemingly demonstrating his commitment to policy and behavioral alteration, Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) likewise emphasized a non-confrontational and accommodating methodology and tone.

In particular, the 2010 NSS emphasized the importance of wielding "soft power" when pursuing United States national interests (Obama 2010b). For instance, it mentions "Strategic Communication", which is conceptualized as the promotion of dialogue, direct interaction, and taking into consideration local opinions and grievances when drafting foreign policy, as a methodological standard. The strategy likewise recommends paralleling these soft power tools with an alignment of U.S. actions and words, "to convey credible, consistent messages and to develop effective plans, while better understanding how our actions will be perceived" (Obama 2010b, p. 16). In short, as expressed in the quote, the Obama administration recognized: (a) the importance of accommodating indigenous grievances, needs, and opinions when interacting with Muslim majority countries; and (b) the importance of transforming how the U.S. pursued bilateral relations by engaging other countries in a symmetrical partnership.

Since the U.S. President is chief diplomat and a visual representative of the country among the international community (Golan and Yang 2013), he/she is ultimately responsible for the actions and perceptions of their administration. Thus, when Barack Obama entered the presidency speaking about transforming the quality of U.S.-Muslim relations, his international audience expected him to pursue this end. Consequently, this essay evaluates Barack Obama's pursuit of conflict resolution vis-à-vis the Muslim community to determine which changes were expected, which policies and practices were implemented, and whether his promise was kept. During our examination, we likewise highlight observable intricacies that affected implementation.

The theoretical value of this research is extensive. Firstly, it comparatively analyzes opinion among the two populations of interest as opposed to selectively focusing on one group or the other. To date, researchers using polling data generally evaluate U.S. foreign policy through the lens of U.S. public opinion (Celso 2014) or examine international public approval of U.S. foreign policy (Ciftci and Tezcür 2016). For instance, Totman and Hardy (2016) qualify Barack Obama's Middle East legacy while analyzing U.S. opinion. Berger (2014) studies Arab/Muslim acceptance of acts of terrorism against U.S. citizens and military personnel and its link to those same respondents' opinions of U.S. culture and policy. By juxtaposing public opinion, we are able to clearly delineate the depth and breadth of the conflict relationship, as well as draw attention to some positive and negative commonalities across popular opinion. This approach underscores the importance of pursuing conflict resolution in context, while providing insight into mechanisms that could advance or set back a hypothetical program. Secondly, we directly evaluate the actions perpetrated during Barack Obama's two terms in office to determine if his behavior corresponds to his message of conciliation. To our knowledge, no other study examines Obama's approach toward the Middle East within the context of his promise to pursue transformation, nor does so while synthesizing it with public opinion of United States citizenry, on the one hand, and that of the international Muslim community, on the other. At the same time, we examine both foreign policy and soft power approaches rather than focusing strictly on foreign policy. Finally, we identify some of the internal and external factors that impacted and complicated the quest to improve the relationship.

To this end, Section 2 of this essay qualifies the estranged relationship between the United States and international Muslim community by juxtaposing popular opinion of "the other". We also examine general perceptions of specific U.S. policies to demonstrate the need for transforming this bilateral conflict relationship and seeking potential methods. After mapping the conflict relationship, we review Obama's Middle East legacy of conflict transformation with Muslims (Section 3) by reviewing his policies and rhetoric vis-à-vis the methods and practices that address Muslim grievances and desires. We conclude our analysis by summarizing our findings and drawing attention to some of the challenges the administration faced while pursuing conciliation (Section 4).

2. Qualifying the Bilateral Relationship

This section reviews open-source survey data to underscore the need for conflict resolution between the United States and the international Muslim community to prevent conflict continuation or escalation. Since 11 September 2001, opinion polls measuring perceptions of U.S. policy of "the other" among the U.S. and international Muslim populations have proliferated. On the one hand, researchers have gauged U.S. opinions of Muslims, Islam, and U.S. foreign policy. On the other hand, anti-Americanism research, which is argued to be developing in the Middle East and North Africa by comparison to any other regions of the world (Berger 2014; Ciftci and Tezcür 2016; Golan and Yang 2013), generally queries Muslims about their perceptions of U.S. foreign policy and U.S. culture. The data accumulated from these two populations qualifies bilateral animosity and distrust across these cultures. It simultaneously provides insight into the roots of the conflict. These latter elements are valuable when examining Obama's regional policy and approach toward the MENA as conducted in Section 3 of this essay.

To map the conflict relationship from a popular perspective, we first explore Muslim opinion (Section 2.1) to confirm the existence of animosity and to identify roots of negative sentiment. Thereafter, we analyze U.S. opinion (Section 2.2) to reinforce the existence of a bilateral conflict. We then close with a brief summary (Section 2.3) of cross-cultural tensions to contextualize our findings.

2.1. Muslim Opinion of the United States

International Muslim enmity toward the United States is a long-standing phenomenon (Abdallah 2003; Ciftci and Tezcür 2016; Hamid 2011; Kitchen 2012). It is rooted in historic events including European colonialism, U.S. neo-colonialism, as well as persistent Western geopolitical intervention. Nonetheless, negative sentiment deepened following the U.S.-led military invasion and occupations of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) (Kitchen 2012; Pew Research Center 2013a). Consequently, between 2003 and 2009, a majority of respondents in the Middle East and North Africa expressed negative opinions of the United States (Telhami 2009; Zogby and Zogby 2009).

To map the intricacies of the conflict relationship between Muslims and the United States, the following Sections more closely examine survey data. Section 2.1.1 evaluates Muslim opinions of U.S. regional policy, while Section 2.1.2 surveys how Muslims perceive U.S. culture and identity. We then examine how perceptions of U.S. policy and culture risk promoting violence (Section 2.1.3). Finally, we study respondents' modest hopes that positive change will be pursued (Section 2.1.4).

After qualifying Muslim opinion, Section 2.2 explores U.S. perceptions of Muslims and Islam. Section 2.2.1 qualifies U.S. prejudice towards Muslims. This is followed by an assessment of U.S. modest hopes that conflict resolution will be pursued (Section 2.2.2). We conclude with a summary of the conflict relationship (Section 2.3). What we find is that the conflict relationship between these two populations is protracted and deeply ingrained. It therefore requires changes in both behavior and perceptions to alter the trajectory of future relations. We are also able to identify avenues that were available to Barack Obama, and several associated pursuits are examined in Section 3 in which we evaluate the success of the President's promise to reconcile.

2.1.1. U.S. Policy as a Component of Negative Perceptions

U.S. foreign policy under the George W. Bush administration explains the degree of local suspicion and distrust expressed by the international Muslim community around the time of Barack Obama's inauguration. Most notably, the George W. Bush administration occupied Iraq and Afghanistan. A majority of Muslims perceived these acts were unjustified and detrimental to Muslim inhabitants of these countries (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). Further undermining popular opinion, during these occupations, the U.S. implemented controversial policies including de-Ba'athification in Iraq and the deployment of indiscriminate military violence during these occupations that claimed civilian lives and trampled (individual and collective) honor (Fontan 2006). Equally deconstructive, U.S. regional

policy frequently contradicted the Bush administration's stated objectives of providing humanitarian assistance or promoting democracy and human rights (Abdallah 2003). On the contrary, during its global war on terrorism, the U.S. manufactured a humanitarian crisis, institutionalized sectarianism, and violated basic human rights (through U.S. incarceration and internment of alleged fighters) (Abdallah 2003; Kepel 2004). The combination of aggressiveness and double standards had a profound impact on MENA popular opinion.

Surveys conducted between 2006 and 2008, for example, found a majority of MENA respondents believed the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq sought to control Iraq's oil supply (Abdallah 2003; Telhami 2009), establish a permanent U.S. military presence in Iraq (Abdallah 2003; Kull 2007), and/or acquire complete control of Iraq (Abdallah 2003; Tripp 2007). Subsequent surveys between 2009 and 2011 found respondents continued to believe that U.S. interests in the Middle East were driven by the desire to control oil as well as protect Israel (Haass 2013; Hamid 2011; Kitchen 2012; Telhami 2011). These perceived strategic objectives are damaging to U.S.-Muslim relations, because they contradict Arab/Muslim economic, social, political, as well as religious needs and aspirations (Abdallah 2003).

Albeit, the most worrisome trend in negative sentiment expressed toward the U.S. policy was that Muslims throughout the MENA condoned the use of violence against U.S. military forces to hasten their withdrawal from the region (Kull 2007). Steve Kull (2007) found Muslim endorsement of such attacks was especially acute in Egypt and Pakistan. Acceptance of the use of violence is concerning, since approximately half of MENA respondents advocated its deployment. These statistics underscore the degree to which Arab/Muslims in the region were opposed to U.S. intervention and the magnitude of resentment they harbored. It equally illustrates how negative sentiment can precipitate the acceptance and/or perpetration of violence against "the other".

With these interrelated factors in mind, Telhami (2004) deduces that U.S. foreign policy is an influential point of reference when Muslim respondents formulate their opinions of the United States. Instructively, surveys show that seventy-eight percent of respondents polled in the Middle East claim that their opinion of the United States is contingent on U.S. foreign policy rather than on what are (often ambiguously) described as "American values" (for instance, freedom of speech or freedom of the press) (Telhami 2004, p. 38). Informing us about which U.S. policies carry the most weight, research conducted between 2009 and 2011 found that Arab/Muslims in the Middle East desire: (1) a withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq (25%); and (2) a U.S. military withdrawal from the Arabian Peninsula (25%) (Telhami 2009). The third most popular policy change that respondents stated the U.S. could undertake to improve their opinion was the brokering of a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine (41%) (Telhami 2009).

In this light, U.S. foreign policy, especially on the issues of military occupation and the Israel-Palestine peace process, is an important contributor to how Muslims perceive the United States. These findings also present us with specific opportunities whereby the United States government might pursue conflict resolution. Consequently, Barack Obama had policy options that may have reversed the degree of regional enmity and distrust expressed toward the United States. Albeit, survey research not only identified U.S. policy as a component of Muslim animosity, it equally suggests that the identity of "the other" is an equally important.

2.1.2. Identity as a Component of Negative Perceptions

In addition to regional policy, how "the other" is perceived must equally be considered when contextualizing negative Muslim perceptions of the United States (Abdallah 2003; Amnesty International 2013; Funk and Said 2004). To illustrate, one survey found that most MENA inhabitants believed that U.S. policy in the Middle East is designed to "weaken and divide the Islamic world" (79%) and to "spread Christianity" (64%) (Kull 2007, p. 5). More specifically, many Muslims perceived U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq as threatening to Islam and Muslims (Abdallah 2003). Such perceptions undermine the pursuit of amity, since the United States is viewed as an existential threat to Muslim identity and wellbeing. Equally problematic, such perceptions are challenging to

manage, and their weightiness has a high potential to ensure conflict continuation or an escalation to violence (Funk and Said 2004).

That said, reference to identity as a root of Muslim enmity must acknowledge the complexities of perceptions. Consequently, Abdallah (2003), as well as Funk and Said (2004), draw attention to the multifaceted nature of opinions in the MENA. Summarizing a dichotomy of "envy and fear, admiration and suspicion," Funk and Said (2004, p. 11) identify advances in technology and certain political principles (democracy, human rights) commonly embraced in the West as respected by Muslims, while the exercise of "Western military, political, and economic power creates feelings of distrust and resentment." The quotes accentuate that Muslims observe both admirable and distasteful qualities when evaluating U.S. or other Western countries and cultures. Appreciating this tendency suggests there are avenues for fostering improved relations (Funk and Said 2004). To better identify these potential sources of conflict resolution, scholars recommend soft power mechanisms such as dialogue—defined here as a symmetrical discussion of issues that aids in the enhancement of mutual awareness and understanding—be pursued, whereby commonalities and resolutions to problems can be mutually explored (Head 2016).

However, initiating techniques such as dialogue necessitate that respective stakeholders view the "other" as a willing and trustworthy partner. Unfortunately, historical experiences and contemporary U.S. behavior have compromised bilateral trust in this context (Funk and Said 2004). Explaining Muslim distrust of the West, Abdallah (2003) cites U.S. support for undemocratic and oppressive governments throughout the Middle East as an example of contradiction between actions and words. More specifically, U.S. leaders often claim to desire to proliferate democracy or to uphold democratic standards, but their support for authoritative leaders suggests duplicity. Such actions undermine popular trust, and, in turn, the probability of pursuing dialogue because U.S. behavior does not correspond with rhetoric (Celso 2014; Hamid 2011; Kitchen 2012). In a nutshell, the U.S. is perceived as an untrustworthy partner.

Exacerbating negative regional sentiment, popular mistrust, and animosity is often monopolized upon by political and religious leaders, as well as the media, in the MENA (Abdallah 2003; Funk and Said 2004; Golan and Yang 2013; Nisbet and Myers 2011). These actors frequently aggravate or manipulate preexisting stereotypes of the U.S. to their advantage by blaming the United States for local difficulties. Such maneuvering diverts attention away from Arab/Muslim leaders and places responsibility onto external governments (Funk and Said 2004). While deflection is sometimes inaccurate and unwarranted, the practice is widely accepted by local populations, because it reinforces preexisting stereotypes of the West or the United States (Funk and Said 2004).

Polling data supports Funk and Said (2004) hypothesis that the conflictual relationship between Muslims and the West is identity-based. Esposito and Mogahed (2010) asked respondents to identify the roots of cross-cultural conflict and found that participants from MENA countries ranked religious (40%), political (40%), and cultural (9%) differences, respectively. Of these, religion and culture are identity-based markers (Esposito and Mogahed 2010).

Esposito and Mogahed (2010) conclusions are important when conceptualizing conflict resolution. On the one hand, Muslim respondents who view conflict as rooted in religion and/or culture are increasingly likely to envisage present and future conflict between Muslims and the West as unavoidable. In short, identity-based roots undermine the potential of implementing and achieving conflict resolution because they are difficult to alter. On the other hand, those who view the conflict as policy-based tend to be more optimistic about the probability that future conflict can be avoided, because it is easier to alter policy than identity (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). The next Section more closely examines how perceptions of policy and identity interplay and can lead to the acceptance or use of violence.

With these local nuances in mind, Funk and Said (2004) argue the derivation of the conflictual relationship between Arab/Muslims and the West is identity-based rather than rooted in opinions about foreign policy. This interpretation challenges the hypotheses offered by Telhami (2009) that

anti-Western/American perceptions among Muslims are largely rooted in (U.S.) foreign policy. The practical and theoretical implication of this assertion is that policy alteration alone would be insufficient for improving cross-cultural perceptions. On the contrary, when identity or culture is perceived of as the primary catalyst for animosity, altering preexisting perceptions of "the other" must be the focus of attention to ensure cognitive reframing occurs. In this manner, the quality of a given relationship can change as perceptions of both "self" and "other" are modified.

2.1.3. Violence, Policy, and Identity

Recognizing the link between violence and perceptions of policy and identity is essential to appreciating how conflicts can continue or escalate. Berger (2014) readily provides us with an example of when negative views of policy and identity impact on the approved use of violence against "the other" in our relational dyad. More specifically, Berger examined Arab/Muslim acceptance of acts of terrorism against U.S. citizens and military personnel and its link to opinions of U.S. culture and policy. He finds that negative opinions of both U.S. foreign policy and culture increase the likelihood that respondents will support acts of terrorism. Surprisingly, however, the target of these violent acts differs according to the dependent variable. Those disgruntled by U.S. foreign policy are more likely to support acts of terrorism against U.S. troops, while respondents that dislike U.S. culture are more likely to approve acts of terrorism against U.S. civilians (Berger 2014). While the hypothetically approved target shifts, we observe both the dislike of policy and culture increases acceptability of the use of violence against "the other".

Combining our findings hitherto, we observe several interrelated points. First, both perceptions of policy and identity are factors that influence popular opinion. Second, negative perceptions of policy and identity can lead to the acceptance of violence. As a result, both components must be addressed to transform the quality of bilateral relations in this context (Esposito and Mogahed 2010; Funk and Said 2004). Third, U.S. policy alterations can only mollify only individuals that believe the cross-cultural conflict is politically rooted (Gage et al. 2003). More specifically, while policy change is necessary, it alone is insufficient for addressing the identity component of bilateral enmity (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). Fourth, the attribution of identity via its religious and cultural components makes the conflict relationship more challenging to resolve (Svensson 2013). In this instance, conflict continuation or escalation can only be subverted through the alteration of deeply rooted perceptions among both parties to effect cognitive and behavioral transformation (Parent 2012). We therefore conclude that to alter the conflict relation in a holistic manner, both policy change and perceptive alterations are necessary to improve the quality of Muslim-United States relations. Nonetheless, such pursuits will be difficult to achieve and require a long-term, sustained program.

We close our analysis of Muslim public opinion by examining the degree of optimism expressed by respondents that relational changes between these two cultures will be pursued.

2.1.4. Muslims' Modest Hope of Conflict Resolution

Despite the root causes, whether cultural differences or policy concerns, surveying determines that Muslim popular opinion favors conflict resolution. Esposito and Mogahed (2010), for example, found that 61% of MENA respondents believe that the quality of Muslim-West relations is pertinent to them. Equally promising, half (55%) feel that conflict between Muslim and Western cultures can be avoided. Respondents also overwhelmingly agree that Muslims respect the West, with sixty-one percent perceiving the international Muslim community as committed to improving relations with the West. While these statistics are cause for optimism, because they demonstrate there is hope for conflict resolution, respondents are less optimistic when interpreting Western reciprocity (Esposito and Mogahed 2010).

More specifically, most MENA respondents felt the West does not do enough to improve relations (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). Further querying illustrates that respondents transferred responsibility for the poor quality of Muslim-Western relations onto their Western counterparts. In fact, 65%

claimed the West does not respect Muslims (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). Disrespect is problematic for building constructive relationships, because it threatens identity and produces mistrust and grievances. In a similar vein, half of those surveyed believed that Muslims residing in the West were not "treated as equal citizens" and were instead "excluded from social, political and civic life" (Gallup 2011, p. 6). The grievances quoted refer to discriminatory practices, such as the banning of headscarves, which Muslims deem unacceptable (Esposito and Mogahed 2010).

Esposito and Mogahed (2010) survey goes on to query which additional changes Muslim respondents desired to see Western countries implement. To bridge cross-cultural differences, 63% of MENA participants believed that increased social interaction would enhance the quality of Muslim-West relations (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). Interaction is expected to impart greater understanding and appreciation, and thereby transform perceptions. Furthermore, a majority expressed a desire for inhabitants in the West to respect Islam and its symbols, treat Muslims fairly, and properly depict Muslims in film and media (Esposito and Mogahed 2010; Gallup 2011). Once again, these are identity-based concerns, whose abuses foster Muslim perceptions of being victimized and discriminated against. However, completing our discursive circle, Mogahed (2006, p. 3) also found that Muslims want the West to "stop interfering in the internal affairs of predominantly Muslim states." This assertion once again underscores the dual nature of conflict influencers, which reiterates that policy, as well as identity-based issues, have an impact on the quality of Muslim and Western/U.S. relations.

With our examination of Muslim opinion of the West complete, we now turn our attention to U.S. perceptions of Muslims and Islam.

2.2. U.S. Perceptions of Muslims

Paralleling the previous section on MENA popular opinion, this section examines U.S. sentiment toward Muslims and Islam to complete our mapping of the conflict. Polling shows that U.S. perceptions of the "other" mirror Muslim conceptualizations outlined above. While the West has a long history of negative perceptions of Muslims, the 11 September 2001 terrorism attacks on the United States heralded a new era of suspicion among U.S. citizens (Haddad and Harb 2014). Since then, negative sentiment has been exploited and exaggerated by some politicians, while an industry promoting Islamophobia was constructed. The latter has been represented in the media by nationally recognized personalities including Glenn Beck and Paul Wolfowitz (Haddad and Harb 2014). Such actors exacerbate fear and suspicion of "the other," increasing the probability that mistrust and conflict will persist across these cultures.

The following Sections examine U.S. prejudice toward Muslims (Section 2.2.1) and their pessimism of conflict resolution being pursued (Section 2.2.2). Both Sections confirm the existence of a conflict relationship and the challenges of bridging the cultural divide.

2.2.1. Prejudice Toward Muslims

At the micro-level, anti-Muslim feelings among U.S. citizens increased subsequent to the 11 September 2001 terrorism incidents in New York and Washington, D.C. (Mogahed 2006). As late as 2006, Dalia Mogahed (2006, p. 1) discovered that 39% of U.S. citizens admitted to having "felt some prejudice" toward Muslims. Such prejudice may correlate with Tessler (2003) finding that 54% of U.S. citizens perceived the 9/11 attacks as an identity-based conflict between Christianity and Islam. The combination suggest that U.S. negative opinion of Arab/Muslims is high, and respondents perceive identity is an important root of their enmity.

Confirming that identity is a fundamental component of negative Western perceptions, Hashim (2006) criticizes that Westerners conceptualize Arabs and Muslims as inferior and responsive only to coercion and violence. The obvious danger of these beliefs is that they degrade and demonize "the other" while suggesting that violence is necessary to manage the quality and trajectory of the bilateral relationship (Galtung 2004). Similarly, Funk and Said (2004) accuse the West of misinterpreting and misunderstanding inhabitants of the Middle East and followers of Islam. Prevalent misconceptions

are attributed to a general lack of knowledge of, or interest in, Islam and the Middle East (Funk and Said 2004; Mogahed 2006). These hypotheses are supported by survey research. One study found a majority of U.S. respondents openly admitted to knowing very little about Islam (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). This knowledge deficit is projected to increase instances of racism (Hashim 2006), distrust, and hatred (Funk and Said 2004; Mogahed 2006).

Highlighting the subversive effects of the knowledge deficit, a 2002 survey found 39% of U.S. respondents perceive Islam as "more prone than other religions to encourage violence in defense of their faith" (Smidt 2005, p. 249). The perception outlined in the quote is rooted in the inaccurate stereotype of Muslims as religious radicals, which is frequently bolstered by Western politicians and the media's tendency to conflate Islam, religious radicalism, and terrorism (Funk and Said 2004; Gerges 2009). As such misconceptions proliferate, Westerners adopt a defensive posture and discard objective understanding or appreciation of Muslim grievances or desires (Funk and Said 2004). Western citizens thereby absolve themselves and their government of responsibility by inappropriately deducing that all Muslims are insatiable, violent radicals.

In this frame, it is unsurprising that 36% of U.S. citizens feel the root causes of conflict between Muslims and the West are religiously based, 26% believe they are cultural, and 35% political (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). Here, we observe that U.S. citizens perceive cross-cultural divergences are largely identity-based rather than politically based (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). This conceptualization mirrors that observed in Muslim opinion above. At its extreme, twenty percent of U.S. respondents feel that "most Muslims around the world" do not accept other religions and cultures (Gallup 2011, p. 12). While representing a minority, their accusatory perspective, combined with the belief that the conflict is rooted in identity, suggest that pursuing conflict resolution will require a change in perspectives and policy (Esposito and Mogahed 2010).

2.2.2. U.S. Citizens' Modest Hope of Conflict Resolution

U.S. respondents are pessimistic about the prospects of pursuing conflict resolution in context. In fact, fifty-eight percent believe that Muslims are disinterested in improving relations with the West (Mogahed 2006). Mirroring the opinions of their Muslim counterparts, U.S. respondents also shift responsibility for the quality of relations onto "the other." The paralleling perspectives of both groups underscores the necessity for, and challenges of, transforming how each party views the other. Neither group foresees conflict resolution as a possibility, and both blame the other for the inability to pursue its ends.

Nevertheless, U.S. opinion on the issue is not completely fatalistic. For instance, approximately three quarters of those polled felt Muslim-Western interaction was beneficial (Esposito and Mogahed 2010). Equally positive, 53% of U.S. citizens acknowledged "the West does not respect the Muslim world" (Esposito and Mogahed 2010, pp. 52–53). The combination reveals there is a glimmer of hope for conflict resolution to be pursued and that U.S. citizens assume some responsibility for the deconstructive relationship.

Equally promising, a 2015 survey determined that the U.S. public is beginning to differentiate between Muslims and Islam. More specifically, Telhami (2015) shows that a slight majority of respondents expressed a favorable view of Muslims, but largely rate Islam unfavorably. While it is unclear if or how this distinction will develop in the future, the differentiation between individuals and religious dogma may be a result of increased awareness, greater contemplation, or a generally positive shift in popular opinion toward Muslims. These positive changes suggest an openness to, and a foundation upon which, constructive relations might be cultivated.

2.3. Analyzing the Conflict Relationship

The preceding Sections demonstrate clear majorities of inhabitants in the MENA and the U.S. have held negative views of "the other" for a prolonged period of time. Concerning the former category, animosity toward the United States among Muslims is generally rooted in a dislike of U.S.

foreign policy, as well as an aversion to specific cultural particularities. We find respondents believe the United States is aggressive and at war with Islam, a perception supported by the invasion and occupation of predominantly Muslim countries. Majorities also suspect that Westerners discriminate against Muslims and implement policies that are inconsistent with their rhetoric. In some instances, respondent frustration and disgruntlement were so high that a clear majority perceived violence against the U.S. was necessary and warranted.

Concerning the latter population, the polling analyzed suggest that U.S. citizens frequently hold antipathetic views of Islam and Muslims. Concisely, Islam is perceived of as a violent and backward religion and its followers judged as suspicious. What is even more problematic, U.S. respondents openly admit to knowing little about Muslims, Islam, and the Middle East. The latter tendency is self-reinforcing and exacerbates misunderstandings and misconceptions.

Among both communities, we observed how politicians, social, and religious figures, as well as the media, exploit preexisting stereotypes of "the other". In the MENA, Westerners are frequently blamed for local maladies, while in the West, Muslims are often depicted as radical terrorists. These extreme representations, although generally inaccurate, correspond with local attitudes. They likewise bolster Manichean mindsets as each group envisages being engaged in an "us" versus "them" relationship with "the other".

Combined, the depth and breadth of this conflict relationship is evident, with clear majorities on both sides harboring negative feelings toward "the other". Funk and Said (2004, pp. 4–5) go further to argue there is an existential component to this conflict relationship that incorporates "dehumanizing stereotypes" and the marginalization of positive aspects of the other. These dichotomous and potentially violent characteristics make conflict continuation or escalation probable. Such tendencies prompt scholars to advocate a process of de-escalation and transformation. Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall (Ramsbotham et al. 2011), for instance, convincingly argue that conflict resolution theory and practices are viable for altering deconstructive relations at the intrastate and interstate levels when implemented appropriately. Constructive implementation requires, among other things, taking into consideration the needs and desires of relevant stakeholders, exploring mutually acceptable ways of resolving problems, and exercising cultural sensitivity (Ramsbotham et al. 2011).

Albeit the analysis carried out in Section 2 raises two important points concerning popular opinion about the relative utility of conflict resolution. On the one hand, both Muslim and U.S. respondents are pessimistic that the conflict relationship will be resolved. Equally problematically, both populations hold the other responsible for the quality of the existing relationship. Hence, neither group expects conflict resolution to be pursued and blames their counterpart for this reality. These nuances make its pursuit appear futile or unattainable.

On the other hand, there is some cause for optimism. Foremost, both populations agree that Muslim-U.S. relations are valuable. Equally important, both recognize the value of cross-cultural interaction whereby awareness and respect can be built. These commonalities offer potential routes whereby transformation could be advanced, while formidable, small, well-determined, and positive steps could be used to instigate a program of conciliation.

Funk and Said (2004, p. 13) are optimistic about the relative utility of conflict resolution. However, they condition their optimism on the stipulation that any such process not be used "to establish the rightness of existing positions" or convert "the other." Rather than using the process to project or demonstrate one's rightness, as articulated in the quote, the authors argue that behavioral and cognitive transformation needs to occur symmetrically whereby mutual change and amity can be advanced. Advocating a trifold approach, they prescriptively suggest efforts be made to "counteract misperceptions and double standards" that exist within both groups (Funk and Said 2004, pp. 22–23). Their framework recognizes the necessity of addressing both perceptions and behavior, each of which will be addressed in turn.

First, Funk and Said (2004) recognize identity-based components to the conflict. For example, we demonstrated above that there are cultural and religious elements that influence how "the other"

is perceived. In this case, the conflict is not necessarily rooted in what the other does, but who they are. Modes of addressing such characteristics include, for example, debunking the popular inaccuracy found among U.S. respondents that all Muslims are violent radicals, and counteracting the widespread Muslim belief that the United States is only interested in controlling Middle Eastern petroleum supplies. Such perceptions aggravate relations and therefore must be addressed.

Second, policy changes are likewise necessary. Change is especially necessary for policies that lend credence to the idea that the U.S. is aggressive toward Muslims and exercises double standards when implementing its foreign policy. In particular, the combination of occupation, U.S. maltreatment of Arab/Muslims in places like Guantánamo Bay or Abu Ghraib, and the continual projection of military force and political influence in the Middle East understandably gives the impression that the U.S. is at war with Islam and Arabs (Sageman 2008). Such acts are violent and humiliating, so must be addressed to improve Muslim bilateral relations with the United States. Simultaneously, rhetoric and behavior must parallel one another. For instance, it is recommended that the United States should clearly articulate its objectives in the Middle East, and, thereafter, ensure that its subsequent actions support its stated goals (Funk and Said 2004). In this manner, action would corroborate rhetoric, thereby surmounting one of the Arab/Muslim complaints (of duplicity) noted above. Moreover, when rhetoric and actions correspond, it fosters an environment in which trust can be built.

Consolidated, any efforts designed to transform the conflict relationship must focus on both cognitive and behavioral roots (Parent 2012). Our juxtaposition of popular opinions demonstrates that both components need to be addressed. When both components are incorporated into a program, it will be more effective and inclusive.

The next Section evaluates the effectiveness of Obama's mechanisms and practices designed to improve U.S. relations with the international Muslim community.

3. Barack Obama as Diplomat in Chief

The election of Barack Obama garnered a modest decline in the negative Muslim sentiment toward the United States subsequent to nearly a decade of the global war on terrorism. At this period, only 77% of Muslim respondents continued to hold an "unfavorable" opinion of the United States (Telhami 2009). The slight change in opinion occurred because President Obama recognized the necessity of pursuing conflict resolution and publically referenced its importance. Consequently, 51% of respondents in the MENA stated that they expected meaningful change under his administration (Telhami 2009). However, its pursuit would have required Obama to embark on an elaborate campaign of sustained and palpable modification of understanding and behavior to alter the years of mistrust and animosity accumulated between these groups (Abu-Nimer 2000).

This Section evaluates whether and how Barack Obama's rhetoric and actions moved the United States toward conciliation with the international Muslim community. Since our analysis above shows that there is both a policy and cultural element to the conflict relationship, we will analyze these in turn. Section 3.1 examines six Middle East policies of the Obama administration, including troop withdrawal from Iraq and the proliferation of democracy. Section 3.2 evaluates methods focused on the identity component, or efforts designed to alter how the United States was perceived by Muslims. Section 4 will summarize our findings and examine some of the challenges the President faced when implementing his promised transformation.

3.1. Evaluation of Foreign Policy

Following his inauguration, Obama set out to alter the image of the U.S. in the eyes of the international Muslim community (Kitchen 2012). He made his diplomatic debut promising to change the way in which the United States interacted with Muslims, and he sought to reinforce his rhetoric through tangible action. While some scholars believe that Obama's conciliatory approach was prudent and timely (Gause and Lustick 2012; Gerges 2012), others criticize his foreign policy as lacking teeth and determination (Celso 2014; Dalacoura 2011; Gerecht 2013; Kitchen 2012). What both encampments

generally agree on is that particular (in)actions by the Obama administration produced an inconsistent strategy in the Middle East.

The objective of this section is to outline specific Middle East policies to determine if Obama's deeds corresponded with his conciliatory message. The following Sections examine troop withdrawal from Iraq (Section 3.1.1), combating ISIS (Section 3.1.2), proliferating democracy in the MENA (Section 3.1.3), managing the Israel-Palestine conflict (Section 3.1.4), using drones to counter terrorism (Section 3.1.5), and the closing of Guantanamo Bay detention facility (Section 3.1.6). These components are selected because they were either directly identified in the polls evaluated in Section 2 of this article, or they contribute to the common perceptions that the U.S. is violent toward Muslims and/or inconsistent in its policies and principles. They serve, therefore, as potential methods for altering Muslim opinions.

3.1.1. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq

Barack Obama pledged to continue U.S. troop withdraw from Iraq (Obama 2010b; Totman and Hardy 2016). The drawdown was initiated under George W. Bush and was supported by the U.S. public (BBC News 2011; Haass 2013). Similarly, surveying throughout the MENA shows the act was desired by most Muslims (Telhami 2009). Nevertheless, critics argued that complete military withdrawal from Iraq was premature, because it allowed social-political tensions to fester (Telhami 2009; Williams 2016). Scholars go on to associate the early withdrawal with escalating sectarian violence inside Iraq, conditions which allowed the radical Sunni organization named the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) to strengthen and spread throughout the country (Gerecht 2013). However, the governments of the United States and Iraq, and most citizens of Iraq, had agreed that U.S. military withdrawal should take place. As we saw in the previous Section, this policy was also widely welcomed by Muslims. Consequently, Obama kept his promise to withdraw troops from Iraq, although some suggest reducing the U.S. military footprint in Iraq and the Middle East may have resulted from shifting U.S. foreign interests toward Asia as opposed to addressing Muslims grievances (Haass 2013).

3.1.2. Combating Islamic State

As noted earlier, ISIS origins are in the U.S. occupation of Iraq (2003–2011) and the subsequent insurgency (Frantzman 2017; Katzman 2014; Oosterveld and Bloem 2017). Monopolizing on religious tensions between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, the group was able to root itself and survive. As the Arab Spring spread throughout the MENA in 2010, ISIS expanded into Syria (Oosterveld and Bloem 2017). After significant territorial gains in Syria, it returned its attention to Iraq, taking vast swathes of northern Iraq in early 2014 (Aftandilian 2016). By July of that same year, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the captured territory in Iraq and Syria a caliphate (Frantzman 2017; Oosterveld and Bloem 2017; Siniver and Lucas 2016). Thereafter, ISIS continued to expand its territory and grow its cadre into mid-2015, while the international community slowly fashioned a concerted effort to contain the group (Blanchard and Humud 2017; Frantzman 2017).

Barack Obama has been criticized for his delayed and limited response to ISIS. Williams (2016), for instance, argues the administration inappropriately downplayed the threat it posed to avoid becoming pulled into a protracted military conflict in the MENA. However, Obama had to sideline his goal of reducing the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East and North Africa as ISIS expanded its control (Aftandilian 2016; Blanchard and Humud 2017; Frantzman 2017). Once he decided to combat ISIS, Obama selected to work "by, with, and through" local actors as opposed to taking a leading role or committing a large contingent of U.S. forces (Blanchard and Humud 2017, p. 4; Frantzman 2017, p. 1). In mid-2014, a small group of military personnel, acting as advisors, were sent to Iraq (Aftandilian 2016; Blanchard and Humud 2017; Frantzman 2017). These were supplemented by U.S. Special Operations Forces, air strikes, and direct military aid to Iraq's Security Forces (Aftandilian 2016).

To combat ISIS in Syria, Obama mirrored the type of assistance he offered to Iraq on a limited scale (Williams 2016). Internal and external factors unique to Syria restricted U.S. commitment. In particular,

Russia and Iran's direct military involvement in Syria on the side of Syria's long-time President, Bashar al-Assad, increased the potential risks incurred if the U.S. armed anti-government militias or placed U.S. troops on the ground. Determined not to be drawn into a protracted conflict in Syria, Obama encouraged other MENA countries to take a more direct role to combat ISIS (Williams 2016). The latter's involvement only further muddled sectarianism and geopolitical rivalry in an already complex theater.

The limited response to ISIS by other countries will likely produce long-term sectarian, ethnic, and geopolitical ramifications in Syria, Iraq, and the region. For instance, in Iraq and Syria, Obama's strategy included the assisting of Kurdish groups such as the Peshmerga (Aftandilian 2016; Frantzman 2017; Williams 2016). In some instances, aid to Kurdish groups was conditioned on the recipients engaging ISIS (Williams 2016). However, training and equipping Kurdish forces as a means of combating ISIS risks destabilizing individual countries such as Turkey and Iraq once ISIS has been contained or defeated.

As a result, Obama's policy against ISIS has been summarized as one of containment (Oosterveld and Bloem 2017). Harsher critics, however, describe it as ad hoc (Frantzman 2017), ineffective, and suggestive of Obama's weakness and indecisiveness (Williams 2016). The President's reluctance to intervene against ISIS, and his refusal to assume a more direct role, arguably permitted the emergence of a humanitarian crisis in both Syria and Iraq (Aftandilian 2016). His inaction, therefore, could be interpreted as counterproductive to building Muslim trust because of the high rates of civilian deaths, destabilization, and destruction that was left unchecked in ISIS's wake. However, this assumption is inaccurate when public opinion is considered.

Despite the brutal spread of ISIS, sixty percent of U.S. respondents opposed arming anti-government militias in Syria or becoming directly involved (Stokes 2012). Similarly, polling data shows that MENA respondents did not support Western intervention in Syria (Brancati 2014). Those latter respondents also opposed Arab government involvement. Consequently, we observe that both domestic and international opinion opposed U.S. intervention in Syria despite the humanitarian crises which manifest in Syria and Iraq.

3.1.3. Proliferation of Democracy

Obama was reluctant to promote democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (Gerges 2012). During his tenure, he only moderately criticized undemocratic governments such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and his reservations undermined Muslim public opinion (Gerges 2012; Selim 2013). Simultaneously, he dramatically cut U.S. funding allocated for promoting democracy in the Middle East, which ultimately reflected duplicity (Selim 2013).

Critics argue that Obama should have supported reforms, offered resources, and applied political pressure to remain true to the democratic principles he rhetorically promoted (Gerges 2012; Gerecht 2013). For instance, when the Arab Spring popular uprising began in 2011 in Egypt and Tunisia, detractors argue that Obama should have assisted the movements (Celso 2014; Hamid 2011; Kitchen 2012). Instead, however, he distanced himself from the movements and made only modest reference to the necessity for political and social reform (Dalacoura 2011; Gerges 2012; Gerecht 2013; Haass 2013; Hamid 2011; Kitchen 2012).

As the Arab revolutions spread and intensified, scholars conjecture that Obama feared events might bring anti-American leaders to power throughout the Middle East and North Africa (Hamid 2011; Kitchen 2012; Selim 2013). Consequently, the President inconsistently responded. For instance, he initially endorsed Egypt and Tunisia's sitting leaders, only later advocating for democratic transition (Selim 2013). On occasions when change in the political status quo, Obama was hesitant to embrace democratic principles. For example, he later rejected the democratically elected Islamist governments in Egypt and Palestine out of fear they would encumber U.S. interests or destabilize the region (Hamid 2011). At the same time, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also fluctuated its

response to the Arab Spring. Sometimes the GCC embraced reform, at other times it remained silent as governments deployed military suppression to undermine the revolts (Colombo 2012).

It is likely that domestic and international opinion leveraged his nonresponse. On the one hand, U.S. domestic public opinion, which Brancati (2014) argues is essential to bringing U.S. resources to bear for promoting democracy abroad, was absent. In late 2012, while the Arab Spring was underway, Pew Research found sixty percent felt the United States should not become directly involved in the uprising and a slightly greater percentage opposed arming anti-government militias in Syria (Stokes 2012). The trend remained relatively stable when polling was conducted again in early 2013 (Stokes 2013).

There are several explanations for U.S. public reluctance. First, U.S. respondents did not believe that any political changes made by the Arab Spring would be beneficial in the long-term (Stokes 2012). Moreover, a slight majority agreed that stable, undemocratic regimes were more preferred than regional instability. These findings lend credence to the hypotheses that the U.S. public is reluctant to support democracy promotion internationally when costs are high, and the probability of success is perceived as limited (Brancati 2014). Thus, it is reasonable to deduce that domestic public opinion may have influenced Barack Obama's hands-off approach to the Arab Spring.

On the other hand, respondents from European and MENA countries were equally reluctant to support Western intervention in the Arab Spring uprisings (Brancati 2014). In particular, Pew Research found that citizens in only one of six countries questioned in the Middle East supported Western intervention in Syria. Those same respondents also opposed Arab government involvement (Brancati 2014). Consequently, we see the international Muslim community appears to have opposed external intervention. In such instances, foreign governments risk condemnation and backlash if they became involved. However, there is dissent in the literature. Hamid (2011) argues that Arabs wanted the U.S. to promote democracy and aid its proliferation in the MENA region.

Obama eventually intervened in Syria and Libya in a limited fashion. In hindsight, the relative utility of U.S. involvement in both theatres was minimal, while its value likely only protracted internal violent conflicts rather than hasten democratic transition. In Libya, the administration provided limited assistance with other North Atlantic Treaty Organization members operating in the country and then quickly exited (Williams 2016). In Syria, Obama was slow to respond. Among his critics, Gerecht (2013) chastises Obama for threatening Syria's President Bashar al-Assad's for his use of chemical weapons but then never following up after several chemical attacks. However, Gerecht's criticism is not based on democratic principles, ethics, or interest for the wellbeing of citizens of Syria. On the contrary, his critique is that Obama's policy gave the perception of U.S. weakness. While this critique may appeal to U.S. constituents, it has less resonance with Muslims.

Unquestionably, Obama should have ensured that his rhetorical promotion of democracy was supported by policy. His inconsistencies risked undermining regional trust and U.S. legitimacy as an arbiter for democracy. It also underscores that U.S. geopolitical interests continued to trump principles when tough choices had to be made.

3.1.4. Israel-Palestine Conflict

Throughout his presidency, Barack Obama spoke of brokering a two-state solution to the protracted Israel-Palestine conflict (Elgindy 2016). He established a peace envoy early (Elgindy 2016; Ruebner 2016), rhetorically encouraged the relevant parties to engage in negotiations, condemned Israel's settlement building (Elgindy 2016), and implored Israel to adhere to the 1967 borders (Quinn 2015). During his 2009 Cairo speech, Obama (2009a) openly expressed his position on the matter. He referenced the weightiness of the issue for Muslims, the illegitimacy of Israel's expanding settlements, and the importance of finding a viable resolution for regional stability (Obama 2009a; Quinn 2015). In his message, Ruebner (2016) summarizes that Obama's rhetoric was sympathetic to Palestinians. However, Obama's preliminary efforts to broker peace faltered in the middle of his first term in office (Elgindy 2016).

An impasse between Barack Obama and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu soon became evident by sharp rhetorical and policy disparities (Blackwill and Gordon 2016; Quinn 2015; Ruebner 2016). With tensions between the two heads of state increasing, Obama became more passive on the issue. He never directly pressured Israel to engage Palestine in negotiations and seldom made reference to Israel's violation of human rights norms in the occupied territories (Gerges 2012).

In 2013, Obama again tried to rekindle negotiations (Quinn 2015; Ruebner 2016). They faltered the following year. At this point, the President was criticized for heavily relying on his Secretary of State instead of being more personally involved (Quinn 2015). Considering the quality of his relationship with Israel's Prime Minister, it is doubtful that Obama's direct involvement would have altered the outcome.

Although the President vocally advocated a settlement, and made several attempts to advance the process, there were numerous inconsistencies under his administration. In fact, critics argue that aside from his message, Obama's policy replicated the pro-Israel approach of his predecessors (Ruebner 2016). To illustrate, Israel continued to receive large amounts of military aid from the United States during Obama's tenure (Blackwill and Gordon 2016; Ruebner 2016). Similarly, in early 2011, the United States vetoed a United Nations Security Council draft resolution that condemned settlement construction (Elgindy 2016; Ruebner 2016). The Obama administration likewise blocked Palestine's effort to obtain recognition as a state at the United Nations (Ruebner 2016). These acts, among others, contradicted the President's stance on settlement construction and a two-state solution. It also gave the impression of U.S. bias toward Israel.

However, there were a few instances where the administration acted on its rhetoric. One example occurred during the last month of Obama's presidency. At this time, the administration refused to veto a December 2016 Security Council Resolution that condemned Israel's settlement building (Sengupta and Gladstone 2016). The act overturned an established trend of the U.S.'s protection of Israel in this venue—an act which was applauded by some and condemned by others (Sengupta and Gladstone 2016). While symbolic and more attuned to his message, the definitive value of the action was marginal at best and came too late in his tenure.

Overall, Barack Obama's actions regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict replicated longstanding U.S. policy toward Israel, although in many instances his message echoed Muslim interests. The duplicity in his approach, nevertheless, cannot be overlooked. As examined above, such practices are recognized for promoting anti-American sentiment among Muslims, and therefore likely compromised trust.

For the sake of objectivity, it should be noted that the administration faced several international and domestic challenges while pursuing negotiations in this protracted conflict. On the one hand, Israel's leadership and citizens became more politically conservative during this time (Blackwill and Gordon 2016). This reduced their willingness to negotiate on settlement building and the status of Jerusalem. Concurrently, the Arab Spring uprisings throughout the MENA captured the attention of U.S. and regional actors (Elgindy 2016), as did the territorial gains of ISIS (Quinn 2015). The cumulative effects of these events weakened the political will of both local and regional stakeholders.

On the other hand, the President has a limited capacity to dictate a peace process due to the weight of domestic public opinion and partisan politics in the United States. Marsden (2014) informs us that contemporary U.S. favoritism of Israel is rooted in Christian Conservative constituents who largely affiliate with the Republican Party. A late 2015 survey, for example, found that a majority of U.S. citizens wanted their government to play a neutral role in brokering a peace settlement between Israel and Palestine (Telhami 2015). However, when political affiliation is factored into the survey data, we find that most Republicans prefer the U.S. align itself with Israel in those negotiations.

Moreover, domestic partiality toward Israel is evident in government. United States representatives vocally commit themselves to ensuring Israel's security (Haass 2009). Its unconditional support places the U.S. government and its citizens on a collision course with Muslims (Ayoob 2012). As witnessed, the United States generally sides with Israel, and does not, for instance, use its immense leverage to alter Israel's policy in the occupied territories. Some observers attribute this bias to the

power and influence of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) lobby on the U.S. government (Quinn 2015). Regardless of its roots, social and political partiality undermines U.S. legitimacy as a neutral peace broker and sours Muslim opinion of the United States.

3.1.5. Drone Strikes

The use of unmanned drones as a method of countering terrorism abroad was initiated by the George W. Bush administration. However, Barack Obama more than doubled the use of drone attacks during his tenure (Aftandilian 2016; Boyle 2013). Increased reliance on drones is hypothesized as a consequence of a weak U.S. economy and U.S. citizens' reluctance to embrace troop deployment where casualties are likely (Boyle 2013; Haddad and Harb 2014; Williams 2016). Drone usage, therefore, has become the preferred mode of countering terrorism that is strongly supported by the U.S. public regardless of political affiliation (Pew Research Center 2011).

However, international public opinion condemns the use of unmanned drones (Pew Research Center 2013a). In particular, Obama's preference for drone usage in countries like Pakistan clearly counters Muslim popular opinion, fostering anger and frustration (Pew Research Center 2013b). The use of drones in MENA countries gives the impression that the United States is engaged in a war against Muslims.

3.1.6. Guantanamo Closure

One act perpetrated by the George W. Bush administration that was perceived as humiliating and offensive to Muslims was the Guantanamo Bay military detention center (Fontan 2006). The facility contradicted principles and standards often advocated by the U.S. government by perpetrating human rights abuses and violating domestic and international law (Hoff 2016). Guantanamo Bay epitomized U.S. duplicity, since rhetorical promotion of principles such as the rule of law and democracy were superseded when United States' national security interest was perceived to be at stake.

As Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency, he promised that he would close the facility if inaugurated (Totman and Hardy 2016). To his credit, one of his first actions in office was to sign a directive that closed Guantanamo (Bradley and Goldsmith 2016; Hoff 2016). While initial efforts to close the facility were demonstrative of his determination to uphold principles of justice and rule of law, Obama left office with the detention facility still in use (Hoff 2016). Despite repeating his desire to close Guantanamo throughout his two terms in office, Obama eventually backpedaled. During his tenure, prisoners continued to be detained and denied certain rights, including the right to a trial and legal representation (Hoff 2016).

One reason the facility continued to operate was because of the U.S. Congress. Congress repeatedly blocked Obama's efforts to release or relocate inmates, while individual state legislatures often refused to accept prison transfers (Hoff 2016). Ultimately, Obama was unable to broker a political compromise or find locations that would accept inmates. As a result, the facility remained operational. The President's failure in this regard meant that the Obama did not live up to his promise.

3.2. Evaluation of the Identity Component

Subsequent to assessing Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East, we turn our attention to mechanisms the administration utilized to address the identity component of the Muslim-U.S. conflict relationship. While it is challenging to identify particular techniques directly associated with attempts to alter how Muslims perceive U.S. culture and its citizens, the following four Sections evaluate Obama's rhetoric (Section 3.2.1), the promotion of interfaith dialogue (Section 3.2.2), an entrepreneurial summit (Section 3.2.3), and a science and technology envoy (Section 3.2.4). These were soft power initiatives designed to transform opinions through direct interaction to demonstrate that U.S. citizens and their leaders wanted to construct positive relations and could alter the way they interacted with Muslims.

3.2.1. Softening Rhetoric

Scholars argue that the manner in which a leader articulates their goals affects policy perceptions and implementation (Siniver and Lucas 2016). While articulating his foreign agenda, Barack Obama was perceived as more conciliatory in tone than George W. Bush (Totman and Hardy 2016). Consequently, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning President piqued Muslim interest as they anticipated a change in Obama's approach (Telhami 2009). By way of example, Obama (2010b) spoke of dialogue and soft power as a method of improving bilateral relations. Leading credence to his rhetoric, he was a vocal opponent of the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq (Totman and Hardy 2016). He also repeatedly reminded his domestic and international audiences that the United States was not at war with Islam or its followers in speeches in Cairo, Egypt (Feste 2011; Totman and Hardy 2016) and Jakarta, Singapore (Obama 2010a).

While Obama's conciliatory rhetoric was designed to demonstrate that U.S. politicians and citizens were capable of altering their perceptions of and behavior towards Muslims, his message was not without its critics. On the 2016 Presidential campaign trail, for instance, a campaigning Donald J. Trump denounced Barack Obama for not using the phrase "radical Islamic terrorism" (Mohamed and Mohideen 2016). Trump's critique was designed to portrait the sitting President as someone who pandered to foreigners as opposed to taking a tough stance on Islamic terrorism by clearly identifying the perceived threat. Trump's rhetoric, however, has been largely viewed as populist, racist, and inflammatory to Muslims (Gökariksel 2017). In this case, Obama was obviously more accommodative in his tone than other U.S. politicians, but his rhetoric needed to be supported by actions to bridge the relational divide.

3.2.2. Interfaith Dialogue

Dialogue is a practice that is widely accepted by conflict resolution scholars to alter perspectives of "the other" (Head 2016). In this frame, Obama took several steps to improve dialogue across cultures. First, he appointed a Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as a means of institutionalizing interreligious dialogue, although George W. Bush actually established the envoy (Marsden 2014). The objective of this organization was to engage foreign leaders, religious representatives, and civil society to bridge understanding across cultures. Second, a Special Representative to Muslim Communities was also established to improve interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Finally, the State Department was instructed to develop and implement religious educational training for all members of the Foreign Service (Marsden 2012). Although these mechanisms increase understanding and respect of other cultures, they were counterbalanced by other manners in which faith was incorporated into U.S. foreign policy.

As the Obama administration was promoting interfaith dialogue and claiming that the U.S. was not engaged in war with Muslims (Obama 2015), the federal government increased its utilization of Christian groups to implement its soft policy (Marsden 2012). For instance, Samaritan's Purse, a Conservative Christian group that received government funding, operated in predominantly Muslim countries including Iraq. During their operations, Samaritan's Purse not only distributed U.S. government aid but also engaged in proselytizing (Marsden 2012). Naturally, such activities counter the assertion that the United States does not threaten Muslims or Islam, and instead gives the impression that the U.S. government is openly promoting the spread of Christianity in predominantly Muslim countries. This arrangement undermines the utility of soft power and dialogue. It equally raises questions about the altruistic nature of humanitarian assistance offered by the United States.

3.2.3. Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship

During his Cairo speech, Barack Obama (2009a) promised to hold a summit on entrepreneurship between U.S. businesspersons, organizations, and entrepreneurs and their international Muslim counterparts. The two-day summit was held in Washington, D.C. in late April 2010 and was

designed to spur innovation, increase partnerships, and to enhance employment opportunities globally (Office of the Press Secretary 2010a). The event, sometimes referenced as the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, has been repeated annually since it began. It has been hosted in various locations, including the United States, Morocco, and Turkey (Office of the Press Secretary 2010b).

In conjunction with the summit, the Obama administration also advanced bilateral cooperation by creating new opportunities for foreign exchange, acquiring direct U.S. government financial assistance and new types of partnerships (Office of the Press Secretary 2010b). Each will be briefly addressed in turn. First, several exchange programs were established to provide entrepreneurs and educators the opportunity to share, be educated by, and mentored in the United States. Second, in terms of financial access, the State Department partnered with numerous government agencies, such as USAID, to make funding available to startups, healthcare, education, and other sectors. Finally, one partnership is a Silicon Valley-based venture that provided mentorship, financing, and technology to a program based in certain Middle East and South Asian countries (Office of the Press Secretary 2010b). These soft power approaches offer multiple economic and social benefits to participants, but they, more importantly, impact on participant perceptions of "the other", and thereby are useful to transform relationships over time.

3.2.4. Science and Technology Envoy

Since U.S. advances in science and technology are often admired by Muslims, as outlined in Section 2.1.2, Obama established an envoy (Witze 2009). The envoy was dispatched to individual countries to acquire insight into how the United States and each country could cooperate in the fields of science and technology. Local representatives provided their points of interests and the envoy then sought to create the appropriate partnerships to provide the requested assistance (Witze 2009). Its soft power approach is designed to promote cooperation through exchange and partnership.

4. Obama's Legacy of U.S.-Muslim Conciliation

U.S.-Muslim antagonistic relations were fractured by the George W. Bush administration's war on terrorism. Some drivers of Muslim animosity were the United States invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as its perpetration of human rights abuses in facilities like Guantanamo Bay. These controversial activities, among others, were promoted as necessary for U.S. national security, but were largely perceived by inhabitants of the MENA as aggressive and anti-Muslim in nature. At its extreme, MENA respondents ultimately believed the United States was at war with Islam, and some advocated the use of violence against the U.S. in response.

In the United States, the 11 September 2001 attacks exacerbated citizens' negative perceptions of Muslims. Islam was increasingly perceived of as a backward religion and Muslims as inherently violent. Among both communities, political and religious leaders and the media exploited preexisting stereotypes of "the other". Clear majorities in both communities harbored negative feelings toward "the other" and perceived them as an existential threat (Funk and Said 2004). On the eve of the 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign, mutual distrust and prejudice between the international Muslim community and U.S. citizens was pronounced and rooted.

Through their studies, researchers had not only qualified the depth and breadth of mutual mistrust and dislike, they likewise identified some of the roots of the conflict relationship. On the one hand, studies found that U.S. foreign policy was partially to blame for Muslims' negative sentiment. MENA respondents were, for instance, frustrated with U.S. geopolitics, including a perceived U.S. bias towards Israel. On the other hand, identity was also deemed a root of negative perceptions across these collectives. Muslims largely viewed the United States as a selfish, untrustworthy partner that was inconsistent in word and deed. U.S. citizens felt themselves engaged in a war between Christianity and Islam.

Due to the severity and persistency of the antagonistic relationship, scholars advocated conflict resolution be pursued to avoid a continuation or escalation of violence by altering perceptions of,

and behavior toward, "the other". Academics, including Funk and Said (2004), mapped the conflict relationship and suggested specific changes that would diminish bilateral tensions between the West and international Muslim community. Other researchers probed which conflict resolution tools might be mutually acceptable in specific contexts (Gardner and Barcella 2016). All unanimously agreed that behavior and perceptions had to change to transform the quality of the relationship.

Meanwhile, Muslim and U.S. respondents expressed little optimism that conflict resolution would be pursued. Both populations likewise blamed their counterpart for the quality of the bilateral relationship. Surveys were, however, able to identify avenues by which conciliation might begin. Among those identified were specific U.S. policy changes, such as a withdrawal of U.S. forces, and increased cross-cultural interaction.

Newly elected President Barack Obama demonstrated astute awareness of the existing friction between the U.S. and the international Muslim community and its roots. During the early period of his administration, he repeatedly promised to transform the quality of relations in a manner cognizant of Muslim grievances and needs. He spoke of bridging cultural divides, establishing partnerships, exercising mutual respect, withdrawing U.S. forces, and pursuing peace between Israel and Palestine, to name a few objectives articulated. Obama's conciliatory message resonated with the international Muslim community, who anxiously awaited his actions.

Upon inauguration, 51% of respondents in the MENA predicted Obama would introduce meaningful change (Telhami 2009). However, local anticipation waned as Obama's presidency endured. Muslim perceptions of the United States remained predominantly negative into 2011 (Esposito and Mogahed 2010; Pew Research Center 2011; Telhami 2011) and 2013 (Pew Research Center 2013a). The attitude shift correlates with Obama's initial message of conciliation, which ultimately fell short of Muslim expectations as outlined above.

4.1. Inconsistent Policy

The policies and practices examined in Section 3 were selected because they were either noted in the polls evaluated in Section 2, or they contributed to the perception that the United States is violent toward Muslims and/or is inconsistent in its policy and messaging. Likewise, the combination addresses both the identity and behavioral aspects denoted in Section 2. Consequently, the policies and practices examined were theoretically useful methods for improving the quality of U.S.-Muslim relations, because they directly impact on popular opinion. In terms of regional policy, we examined withdrawing troops from Iraq (Section 3.1.1), combating ISIS (Section 3.1.2), proliferating democracy in the MENA (Section 3.1.3), settling the Israel-Palestine conflict (Section 3.1.4), using drones (Section 3.1.5), and closing the Guantanamo Bay detention facility (Section 3.1.6). In terms of practices implemented to alter perceptions of the United States, we explored rhetoric (Section 3.2.1), interfaith dialogue (Section 3.2.2), the Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship (Section 3.2.3), and the science and technology envoy (Section 3.2.4). The combination is believed to be a useful marker, because it informs Muslim evaluations of the United States.

Early in his tenure, the President's conciliatory message (Section 3.2.1) was reinforced by actions. U.S. troops were withdrawn from Iraq (Section 3.1.1) and a peace envoy for Israel and Palestine was established (Section 3.1.4). Obama simultaneously signed the executive order to close Guantanamo Bay detention facility (Section 3.1.6). He later promoted interfaith dialogue (Section 3.2.2), launched the Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship (Section 3.2.3), and dispatched its science and technology envoy (Section 3.2.4). At this point, the administration was addressing fundamental grievances Muslims had expressed (Section 2.1.1), while demonstrating that the U.S. could change its policy and its perception of others (Section 2.1.2). The latter practices were resourcefully founded upon positive aspects that the international Muslim community often cited as positive from U.S. culture and society (Section 2.1.2).

However, as Obama's presidency endured, numerous contradictions emerged between his message and behavior. For example, although he claimed to endorse democratic principles and

standards (Section 3.1.3), the administration continued to support undemocratic leaders in the MENA. In other instances, Obama outright rejected those who had been democratically elected. Such inconsistencies concerning democratic principles lent credence to the idea of U.S. duplicity. These irregularities likewise rekindled Muslim distrust and demonstrated that Obama was no different from previous U.S. leaders who peddled ideals but seldom delivered.

Combined, we observed that Obama's foreign policy in the MENA fluctuated, while his soft power approaches designed to impact how U.S. culture was perceived remained steadfast. The President's conciliatory message persisted throughout his tenure. He also maintained dialogue, cultural exchanges, and implemented various modes of cooperation. For example, he dispatched his science and technology envoy while being aware that international polling showed the United States scored well in these areas, even while respondents simultaneously expressed disgruntlement with its foreign policy. By comparison, Obama's soft power policies were more attuned to his message and Muslim interests than his foreign policy.

4.2. Domestic and Regional Influencers

The President's unpredictable policies may have been a result of the gravity of an evolving and synergetic mixture of domestic and regional challenges. For instance, the Arab Spring had not been predicted, and as it evolved in various MENA countries, Obama found it necessary to approach each revolution on its individual merits (Haass 2013). In some instances, political reform was encouraged and assisted, while at other times it was not.

At the same time, the complexity of international events also hampered the administration's chances of altering the quality of U.S.-Muslim relations. Regional instability manufactured by the Arab Spring, for example, was further complicated by the persistent expansion and resilience of ISIS. These interrelated events forced the President's decisions on issues ranging from the degree of support provided to the Arab Spring (Section 3.1.3) to the size and location of U.S. troop deployment in the MENA (Sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2). It equally impacted on modes of counter-terrorism (Section 3.1.5), as well as Israel-Palestine negotiations (Section 3.1.4). In short, the number and nature of events that contributed to regional instability likely caused Obama to perceive conciliatory moves as untimely.

Consequently, Obama adjusted his policies to respond to regional changes. Altering his initial strategy, he was forced to increase U.S. troop presence in the Middle East to combat ISIS and was reluctant to bring to bear the necessary resources to pressure Israel to negotiate. Both actions countered Muslim desires (Section 2.1.1). Additional counterproductive, Obama intermittently supported Arab Spring movements and increased reliance on drones to limit troop exposure or the costs of counterterrorism. The former practice reflected inconsistencies between rhetorically embraced principles and practice, while the latter made it reasonable to conclude that the United States continued to threaten Islam.

Simultaneously, domestic influencers were also at play. Conflict resolution scholars recognize that embarking on and institutionalizing cognitive and behavioral transformation is a massive political undertaking fraught with risk (Ramsbotham et al. 2011). Such alteration requires support from a domestic population and its politicians, because approval and societal buy-in is essential for nurturing and rooting the process (Feste 2011; Lederach 1995). Expressed differently, individual leaders can be restricted by popular support or fellow political representatives. Thus, a U.S. President has a limited capacity to aggregate domestic political and public support for a particular policy (Feste 2011). Absent political and popular backing, however, the probability of a leader pursuing a policy like conflict resolution is reduced.

With this in mind, domestic political and popular support for specific actions helped restrict Obama's freedom to make changes that would have been viewed by Muslims as demonstrative of change. Foremost, U.S. citizens and many politicians preferred the economic advantages of drone strikes as a means of counterterrorism, although this practice is largely opposed by Muslims throughout the MENA. Second, public tolerance for directly assisting Arab Spring revolutions or deploying

a large contingent of U.S. troops against ISIS was modest. Finally, the U.S. Congress undermined Obama's attempts to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility (Section 3.1.6). In certain instances, Obama's (in)action carried political risk, which included the potential loss of a reelection. Therefore, the administration had to balance its foreign policy objectives with domestic expectations.

Overall, complex and fluctuating internal and external factors helped to reduce the probability of initiating or maintaining a process of conflict resolution. The rise of ISIS and the spread of the Arab Spring, for example, destabilized the Middle East and North Africa. Concurrently, domestic politics and popular opinion had to be readily accommodated to maintain popular and political support. As a result, what at first blush appeared to be a predetermined and sound conciliatory approach evolved into a more ad hoc and nuanced reflexive policy. This outcome reminds us that expected and unexpected challenges can arise to complicate even the most well intended and planned conflict resolution programs.

4.3. Final Assessment

Although some efforts were made to alter the U.S. image in the eyes of the international Muslim community, no significant progress was achieved on this front during Obama's tenure. Despite his notable shift in rhetoric, scholars deduce that there were no obvious behavioral changes in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East (Gerges 2012; Haddad and Harb 2014). Unpopular drone strikes continued, democracy was rhetorically touted by U.S. officials but seldom supported, and U.S. culture and society continued to be viewed with disdain and suspicion. In short, Obama's behavior did not ultimately align with his rhetoric.

Obama was, nonetheless, consistent in his soft power approach and messaging. His efforts at directly addressing perceptions of the United States through cooperation and outreach appear to have been successful. In terms of rhetoric, the President remained conciliatory. He likewise created opportunities for partnerships to students, teachers, and businesspersons in the international Muslim community. Soft power measures are effective at altering opinions yet limited in the volume of individuals fortunate enough to participate. Comparatively, foreign policy is generally observed or felt by the masses and therefore more evident, while soft policy is often directed at a few and takes more time to impact the wider population. For this reason, when evaluated by the masses, Obama will be viewed as inconsistent due to his foreign policy.

By way of conclusion, Fawaz Gerges (2012) deduces that Barack Obama "cares less about consistency and more about successful outcomes and maximizing American bargaining power." However, it is these inconsistencies and the prioritization of U.S. interests that reduced his popularity among the international Muslim community and undermined the prospects of constructing amicable relations that he had initially championed. Consequently, Obama was unsuccessful at transforming Muslim perceptions of U.S. foreign policy and identity.

5. Conclusions

This article evaluated Barack Obama's success at transforming the long-standing conflict between the U.S and the international Muslim community, which is rooted in policy and identity. Scholars suggest that altering behavior and social perceptions requires that the U.S. embark on a complex campaign of sustained and palpable modification of behavior aimed at changing years of mistrust and animosity. President Obama not only recognized the necessity and importance of reconciling U.S. relations with the international Muslim community, he was also cognizant of key principles and objectives the U.S. government had to observe to alter the perceptions of the United States. Of those, he recognized that the grievances, concerns, and needs of Muslims had to be accommodated.

Research shows that Muslim animosity is rooted in both behavior and identity. Seemingly aware of this fact, Obama felt that Muslim animosity and distrust could be transformed by adapting his rhetoric and behavior. To address the behavioral aspects, he promised a withdrawal of troops among

other changes. To address the identity aspect, he discussed the importance of dialogue and other measures to change existing misconceptions about "the other" prevalent in both societies. However, although he initially implemented behavioral changes, his conciliatory rhetoric was not followed up by meaningful action.

Illustrating how Obama failed to act on his conciliatory rhetoric, we examined several policies including his administration's failure to take a leadership role on the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, its duplicity in the promotion of democratic principles, and the unpopular use of drones in counterterrorism, to name a few. These (in)actions compromised Muslim opinion of his administration. Resultantly, Obama's conflict resolution legacy is one of lost opportunity.

During our examination of Obama's approach toward the Middle East, we observed how complex and fluid events forced changes in U.S. behavior. The rise of ISIS and the spread of the Arab Spring, for example, destabilized the Middle East and North Africa, prompting a more ad hoc and nuanced approach. Concurrently, domestic politics and popular opinion equally had to be accommodated to maintain support. These intricacies underscore the expected and unexpected challenges leaders face when conceptualizing and pursuing conflict resolution programs.

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