



**Newsweek**

**June 19, 2009**

### **Obama's Subtle Diplomacy**

**The president's Islamic ties have helped him make headway in the Middle East.**

**By: Eleanor Clift**

President Obama hasn't gotten enough credit for the small-d democratic stirrings he set in motion when he became the first American president to speak directly to the Muslim world. He was criticized for apologizing too much for past U.S. actions, but religious teachings say you must first remove the plank from your own eye before commenting on the sawdust in your brother's. Acknowledging actions broadly recognized as mistakes confers legitimacy, not weakness.

Heightened voter turnout first in Lebanon and then in Iran followed Obama's June 4 Cairo speech. There were other reasons motivating people to the ballot box in these distant lands, but Obama's shared Islamic cultural roots gave him a platform whose reverberations we are just now beginning to appreciate. It's tempting to say we're all Iranians now, cheering for the protesters to triumph in Tehran. But it's best to follow Obama's lead and stay on the sidelines, keeping open the lines of communication.

It's no secret what side Obama is on, and to take a bolder position in favor of the protesters would only feed into the Iranian government's claim that the unrest is a Western media-fueled conspiracy to overturn the regime. I remember Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national-security adviser when I was a reporter covering the Carter White House, talking about his frustration over the shah's inability to control the mounting unrest that led to his downfall and installed an Islamic government in Iran. The brutality of the shah's secret police was well known, but in the end he was unwilling to turn the full power of the state against his own people. The current Iranian leadership may not be so reluctant.

Defeating Islamic extremism requires the kind of public outreach that Obama talked about in his Cairo speech, and that recent administrations have marginalized to America's detriment. Husain Haqqani, 52, Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, credits his evolution away from Islamic radicalism to afternoons spent in the U.S. library at the consulate in Karachi learning about American politics and culture. He became so expert that in 1985, while working as a journalist, he won a game of Trivial Pursuit in a party at the consulate, beating out the senior diplomats. He still remembers the winning question: "Who was Barry Goldwater's running mate?" The answer: Bill Martin, a congressman from upstate New York. "How did you know that?" the U.S. ambassador exclaimed. Recalling the incident, Haqqani laughs: "I was the only 17-year-old that I knew then—and now—to have read the Federalist Papers."

Haqqani traced his political activism to fixing broken sewers and clearing clogged drains in his impoverished neighborhood, where as a 12-year-old he worked alongside a committed Islamist. He identified with the Muslim Brotherhood as a teenager, attending a madrassa in the evening for his religious indoctrination after going to regular school in the morning. That allowed him to spend afternoons at the American library, where he began by reading compilations of great speeches, then, drawn by William J. Buckley's elegant prose, *National Review*, followed by *The New Republic* for another point of view and, of course, *The New York Times*, where he would later work as a stringer.

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In 1979, when the Iranian revolution was unfolding, Haqqani was in college in Karachi. In a show of solidarity with the Iranian people protesting the shah and shouting "Death to America," Pakistani students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad and set it on fire. As president of his university's student union, Haqqani was pressed to lead an attack on the consulate in Karachi, but he resisted. "What I never said out loud is that burning down the consulate would have wrecked the wonderful library there, and deprived me of access to all the books I found so useful for my studies in international relations," he later wrote.

Haqqani recalls how audiovisual aids suddenly appeared in the consulate library after Ronald Reagan was elected and invigorated U.S. propaganda efforts abroad. Reagan named Charles Z. Wick, a flamboyant movie executive, as director of USIA, the U.S. Information Agency. The media made fun of him; among his biggest Hollywood hits was *Snow White and the Three Stooges*, and he seemed bent on turning the world into a Disney movie lot. Reagan doubled the USIA budget, and Wick used the latest technology, which at the time was satellite television, to broadcast and market American ideas and values. Democrats were skeptical, and a decade later—when the Clinton administration was in power and having to placate Sen. Jesse Helms, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who hated anything that smacked of foreign aid—USIA got kicked to the curb, folded into the State Department. It's been moribund ever since, along with the network of consulate libraries that Haqqani credits with helping shape his world view.

You reap what you sow—another biblical admonition that seems appropriate. Whatever the outcome in Iran, Obama has a lot of ground to till in the battle for hearts and minds.