

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Arts and culture, with their capacity to move and persuade audiences and to shape and reveal identities, have untapped potential for increasing understanding, knowledge and respect between the United States and the global Muslim community. Artistic and cultural representations—whether they take the form of a play, a T.V. reality show, a novel, or hip-hop music—challenge traditional stereotypes associated with another culture and humanize “the other.” Thus, investing in arts and culture has the potential to ameliorate the disintegrating relations between the United States and the Muslim world.

The United States, with its unique expertise in creative commercial products, has much to offer the Muslim world, whose distinguished cultural history and production is little known in America. Yet, despite the U.S.’s global dominance in music, film, T.V., and new media, and the pervasive influence of American culture in the Middle East, neither the public nor the private sector in the U.S. has engaged with the Muslim world in any significant, coordinated way in the field of arts and culture. Although there exists a plethora of Bridging the Divide Initiatives and studies of public diplomacy, the United States lags behind European donors and governments in the quality (episodic) and the quantity (about \$11 million for global cultural programming from the State Department; less than 5% globally of private philanthropy for arts and culture in the entire Muslim world), of which less than one per cent targets arts in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>5</sup> Less than one tenth of one percent of total international philan-

thropic dollars is dedicated to arts and culture in the Middle East and North Africa. Equally important, only a tiny percentage of the creative production of the Muslim world reaches American audiences. This is especially regrettable since Islam’s rich traditions of music, dance, literature and poetry, and storytelling would help to present it as a civilization and not an ideology and thus broaden the perspective of the media coverage that focuses on the Iraq war and terrorism. Artistic expression reveals the inherent spirit of openness that is an important part of the Islamic civilization but unfortunately is rarely exposed or recognized in the West.<sup>6</sup>

The United States’ lack of support for arts and culture is surprising given the premium it places on fostering freedom of expression and other democratic principles. In the Muslim world, as elsewhere, artists characteristically challenge and criticize the status quo and promote alternatives to monolithic perceptions and concepts, generally attempting to cultivate a climate of tolerance and pluralism. By its very nature, creative expression encourages experimentation, initiative, and risk-taking. Artists habitually lead the way in critically examining the world around them; they are “the canaries in the coal mine” of free expression.

Our research and interviews indicate a hunger for cultural connections with American artists and cultural leaders among their counterparts in the Muslim world. In turn, meetings with the creative community in the United States have revealed a keen awareness

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<sup>5</sup> For the explanation of these figures, see the more complete discussion on p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> These observations reflect the discussion at the Arts and Culture Initiative Workshop at the 2008 U.S.-Islamic World Forum.

of the critical role arts and culture plays in perpetuating or reversing negative stereotypes (such as those associated with Arabs and Islam in American popular culture) and a desire to contribute positively to increasing understanding across cultures. Finally, the burgeoning cultural sector in the Muslim world—including ambitious initiatives in the Gulf and the growth of new networks and media throughout the Middle East—offers new possibilities for non-traditional, public-private, cross-cultural partnerships, as well as new models of sustainability for nonprofit arts and media organizations.

In order to take advantage of these opportunities, increase understanding, and build connections with the global Muslim community through arts and culture, our research suggests the following recommendations:

- Recognize that the lack of support for artistic and cultural interactions with the Muslim world and the lack of integration of arts and culture into policy and agendas represent lost opportunities. At the core of the U.S.-Muslim world divide is a lack of understanding and respect. The arts have the potential to persuade and alter stereotypes through their emotional impact. Both historically and today, arts and culture have played a critical role in shaping identity in the Muslim world and in providing an outlet for freedom of expression, especially dissent and criticism of authority.
- Use the arts as a component of diplomacy to better understand the historical perspectives and current attitudes of other cultures, and, equally importantly, use the arts where diplomacy fails. Artistic expression opens windows onto societies and cultures and can facilitate discussion of difficult issues where policy makers cannot or dare not tread.
- Value art for art's sake and also as a "post-9/11" bridge builder. Activities that build

partnerships and strengthen arts and cultural institutions within civil society will ultimately take us further than words or "dialogue."

- Support artists and cultural figures in the Muslim world. U.S. public and private institutions can assist by translating, exhibiting, and distributing these artists' work, as well as by inviting them to speak and work in the United States.
- Focus on long-term partnerships. Top-down approaches, where U.S. artists or experts "parachute" in for a performance or a training workshop, tend to have limited effect in terms of building capacity, although they can ignite creative sparks for individual artists. Partnerships and exchanges that are implemented collaboratively and adapted to the local context tend to leave a more lasting, sustainable footprint.
- Combine cultural outreach with capacity building. Successful models of partnerships that combine training in various aspects of media with cross-cultural productions, such as the collaboration behind the animated series *Ben and Izzy* (Layalina Productions, a U.S. nonprofit media company; Fat Rock Entertainment, a U.S. distribution company; Rubicon, a Jordanian animation company), should be leveraged and replicated. Engage the private sector; one of America's strengths is its expertise in commercial artistic and cultural production. Through mentoring and exchanges of knowledge and personnel, the U.S. private sector can help build the capacity within the Muslim world to produce commercially viable music, literature, theater and film. Equally important, the U.S. private sector can support the development of creative talent, in the broadest sense, within the Muslim world. International filmmakers seek not only new voices and stories but also new

sources of less expensive digital production. New technologies are unhampered by geography and can “work” anywhere.

- Support artistic production in the Muslim world online. New media technologies hold tremendous potential for artists in the Muslim world to be able to share their work with the rest of the world and generate revenue. The development and strengthening of the music and film industries in the Muslim world through online production and distribution not only holds the potential to generate much needed jobs and income among youth in the region but also creates possibilities for co-productions and collaborations with young artists in the United States in areas of common interest, such as hip-hop and poetry. Islamic artists and entrepreneurs face the same challenges as their American counterparts do: how to harness and monetize the internet, cell-phone based entertainment, and other alternative formats. The huge hurdles (monetary and political) hampering production of conventional media, such as films and T.V. programs, have led to extraordinary creativity in the Muslim world in exploiting the potential of new media.
- Support local filmmakers. As Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu Assad has demonstrated with his award-winning *Paradise Now*, there are many talented young filmmakers in the region with good stories to tell—the American film industry should help these filmmakers bring their stories to the world.

As a first step, successful mentoring models, such as the Sundance Middle East Screenwriters Lab (of which Assad is a graduate), should be replicated and expanded to include more participants and to cover the full range of film production. In addition, local film communities who could work on foreign films in production in the Muslim world should be encouraged and nurtured. The first film school in the region, the Red Sea Institute for Cinematic Arts, will begin to supply a talent pool for this purpose.

- Leverage the potential of cross-cultural icons. Celebrities, such as Pakistani rock star Salman Ahmed and Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, have the ability to work across cultures, thereby challenging negative stereotypes and broadening knowledge of “the other.”

Implementing even a fraction of these recommendations will require, at the least, a significant infusion of funds from both the public and private sectors. It will also require a restructuring of support for arts and culture in diplomacy efforts within the U.S. government, and greater coordination between the government and the private arts and culture sector. This process needs to begin with a recognition of the importance of arts and culture in shaping the perceptions the United States and the global Muslim community have of each other. The deepening divide between the United States and the global Muslim community is a cultural problem that could be responsive to cultural solutions.